さくら並木

The Rows of Cherry Trees

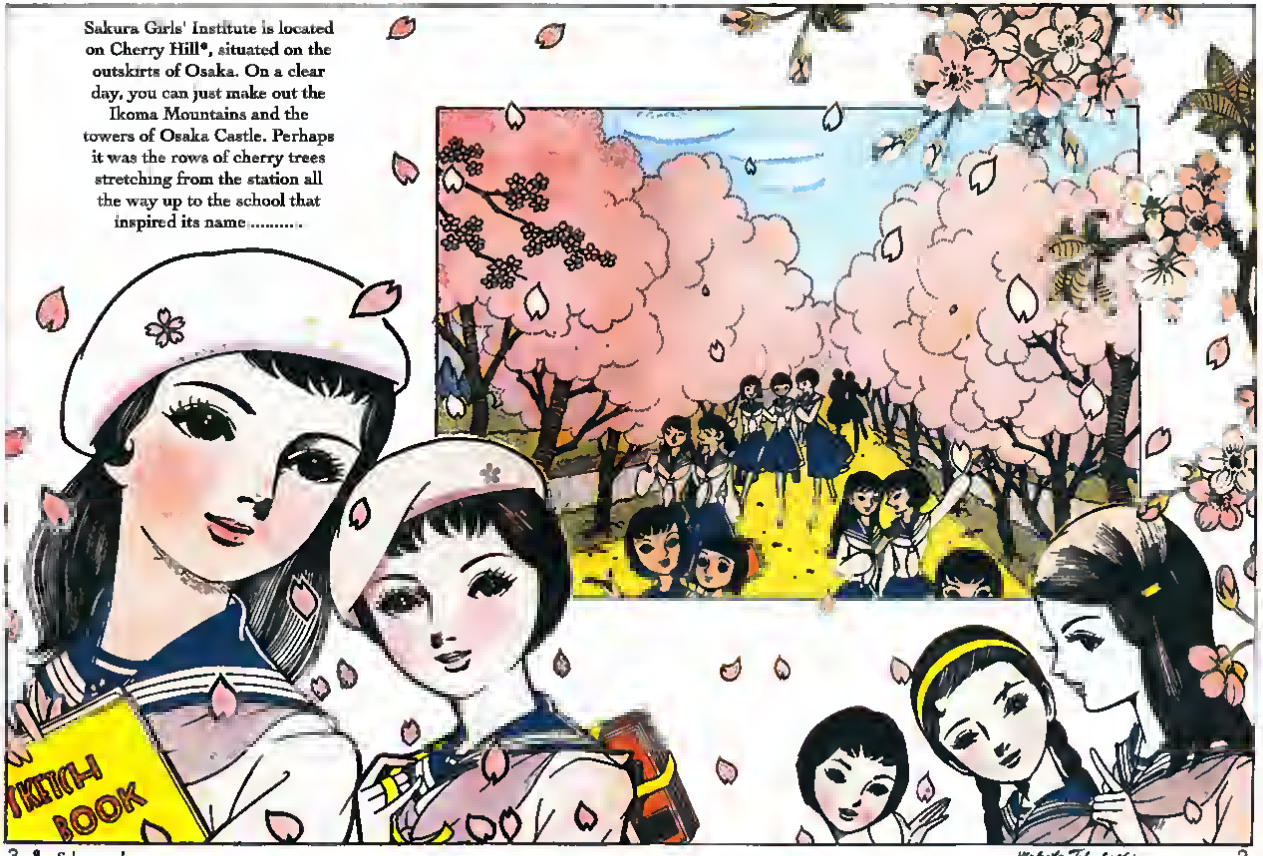
¥ 130 00

A Lyric Manga Tale

The Rows of Cherry Trees

Takahashi Makoto

Sakura Girls' Institute is located on Cherry Hill*, situated on the outskirts of Osaka. On a clear day, you can just make out the Ikoma Mountains and the towers of Osaka Castle. Perhaps it was the rows of cherry trees stretching from the station all the way up to the school that inspired its name.....



* - Sakuraganka

Flowers blossom alike every year
whereas people change annually.*

How many students have the cherry trees glimpsed..... in the decades since the founding of Sakura Girls' Institute?

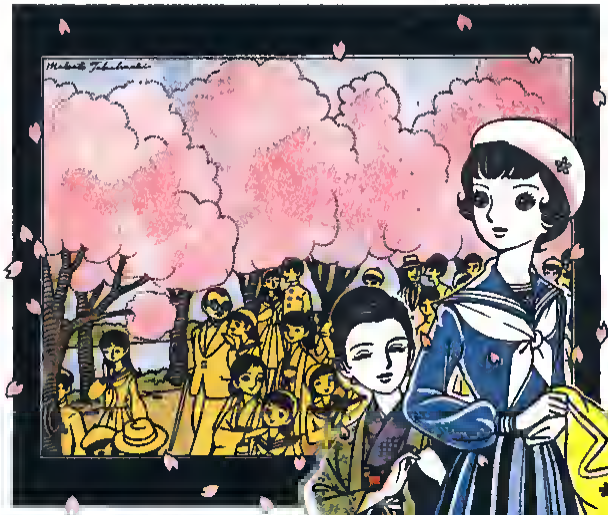
As the stars move and the moon changes, the rows of cherry trees remain ever the same, tenderly watching over the maidens as they did in days of old

* - This is from a famous poem by Liu Xiyi. Translation quoted from *Autocratic Tradition and Chinese Politics* by Zhongyuan Fu.

How many vows of beautiful friendship have been exchanged beneath the cherry trees.....?

And surely there are trees who have quietly listened to the maidens' sorrow?

The rows of cherry trees have shared the maidens' joy and sorrow.....



Hope swells within the new students' breasts at the entrance ceremony.....

Sweet-smelling petals rain down incessantly on the maidens' hair, shoulders, and brand-new sailor uniforms like blessings .....

Girls with braided hair pick up the petals and brush them against their cheeks, their faces shining brilliantly.....

The young romantics quietly tuck the petals away within their breasts.....

.....Graduation.....

The maidens caress the cherry trees, tears in their eyes, lost in fond memories, perhaps .....

The maidens bestow gentle kisses upon the full buds.....

At the foot of countless trees, pairs and trios of girls swear to meet again, holding each other round the shoulders.....

Makoto Takahashi

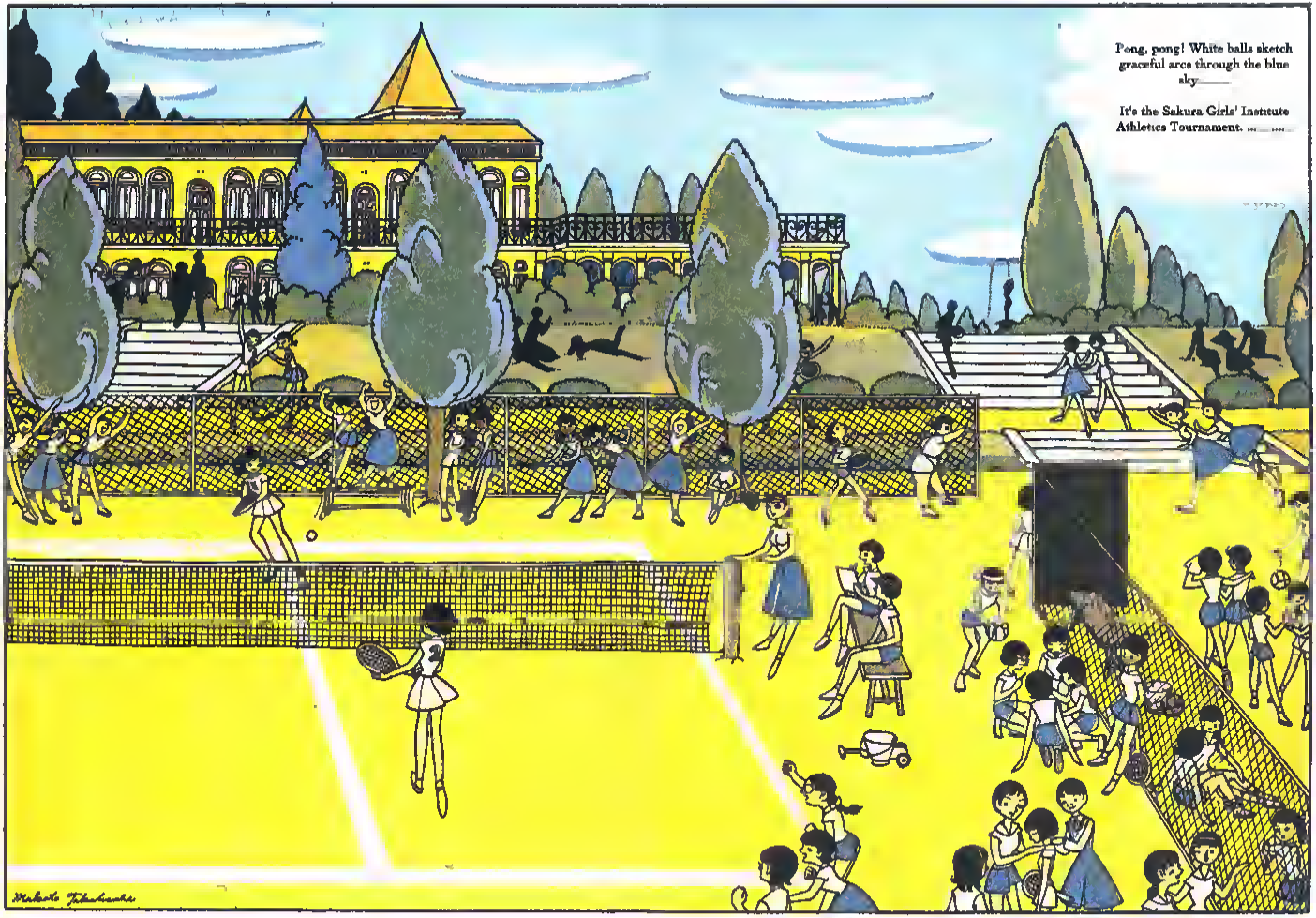
Then, the maidens vanish into the distance, frequently turning back to catch a glimpse of the school building as they proceed through the cherry trees.....

These events are truly as beautiful as lyrical illustrations,
and they occur every year on the tree-lined path

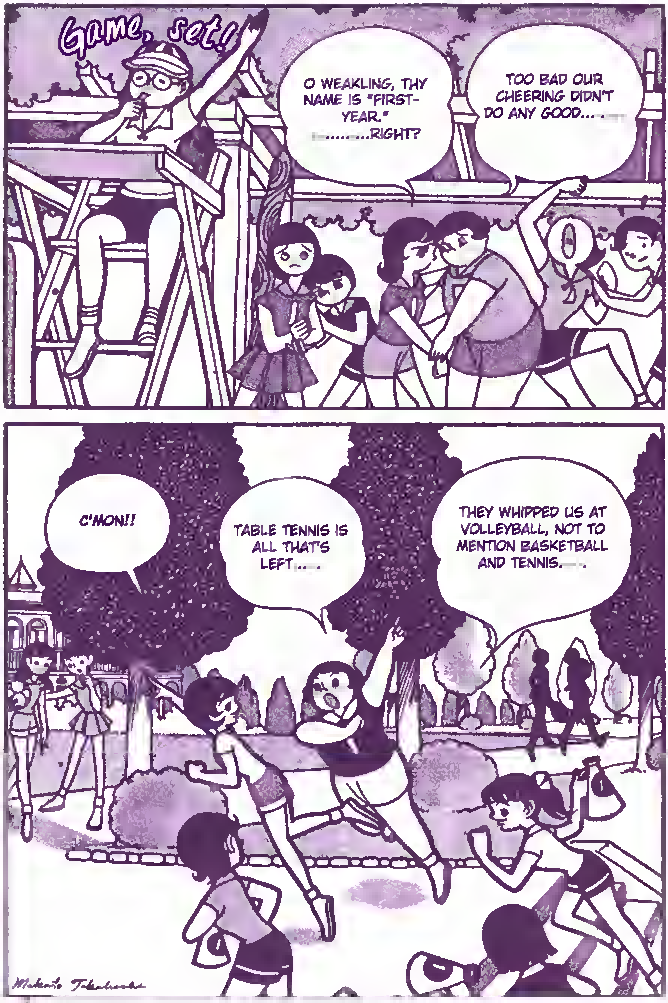
Surely they shall continue to do so for years to come,
so long as the girls of the world maintain their beautiful, kind hearts.....

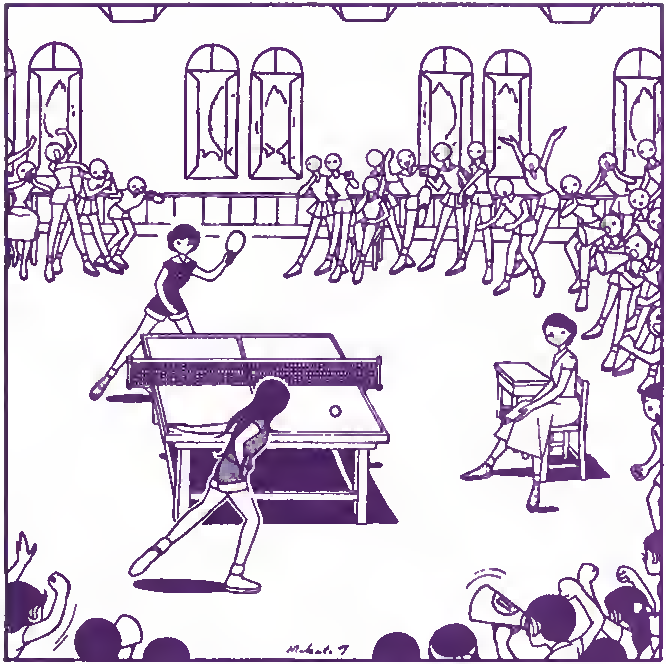
I'm certain the cherry trees are also privy to this little story I'm about to tell you.

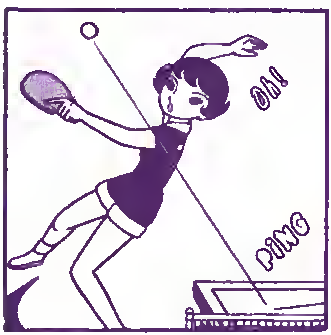
They know all there is to know about Sakura Girls' Institute, down to the teachers' nicknames... ... ...

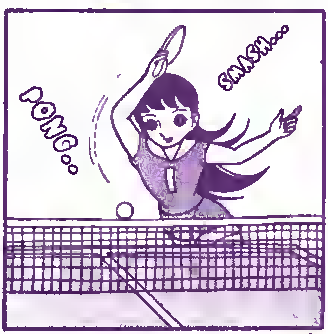

Pong, pong! White balls sketch graceful arcs through the blue sky——
It's the Sakura Girls' Institute Athletics Tournament.
Makoto Takahashi

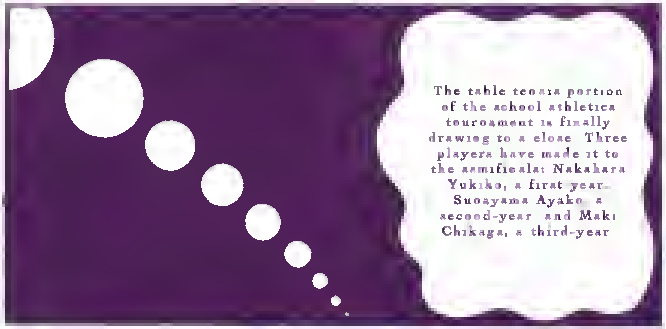
Let's go, first-years, let's go!
Let's go, first-years, let's go!
n-yaaaaa...

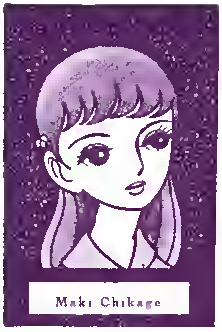

Game, set!
O WEAKLING, THY NAME IS "FIRST-YEAR." .....RIGHT?
TOO BAD OUR CHEERING DIDN'T DO ANY GOOD.....
C'MON!!
TABLE TENNIS IS ALL THAT'S LEFT.....
THEY WHIPPED US AT VOLLEYBALL, NOT TO MENTION BASKETBALL AND TENNIS.....
Makoto Tokuhara



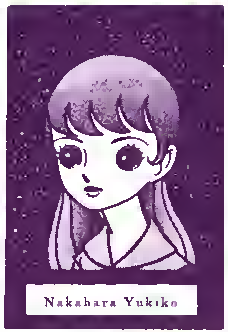

DA!
PING


PONG..
SMASH...

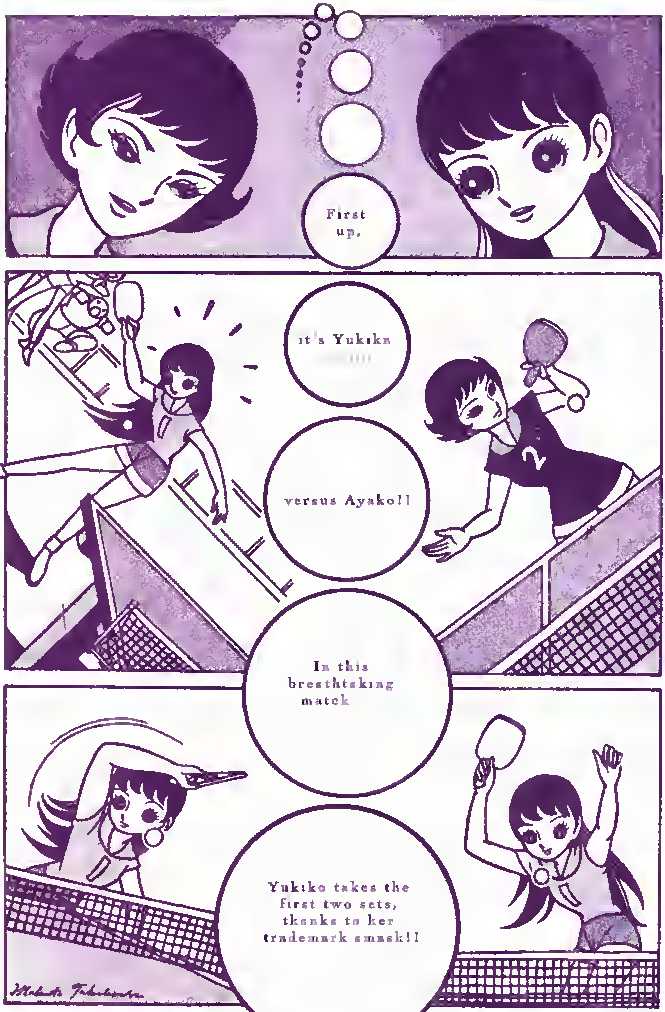

The table tennis portion of the school athletics tournament is finally drawing to a close. Three players have made it to the semifinals: Nakahara Yukiko, a first-year... Sunayama Ayako, a second-year, and Maki Chikage, a third-year.


Maki Chikage

Sunayama Ayako

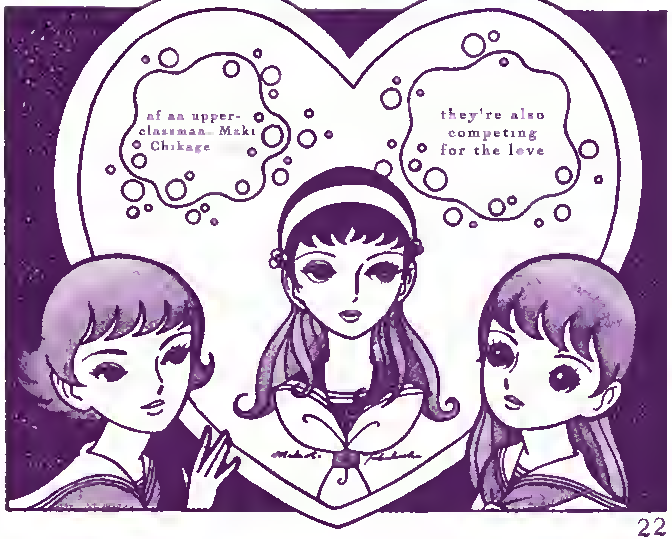

Nakahara Yukiko

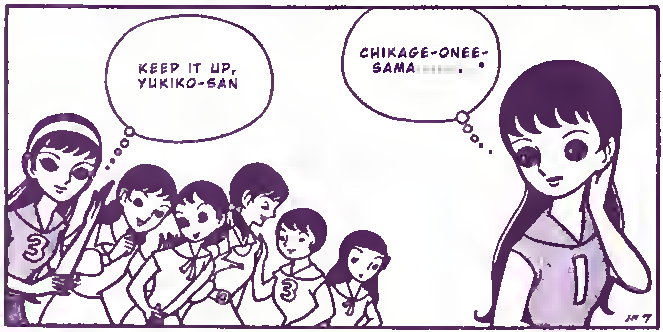
It's turned into a competition between class years, whipping the students into a frenzy!!----


First up,
it's Yukiko!!!!
versus Ayako!!
In this breathtaking match
Yukiko takes the first two sets, thanks to her trademark smash!!

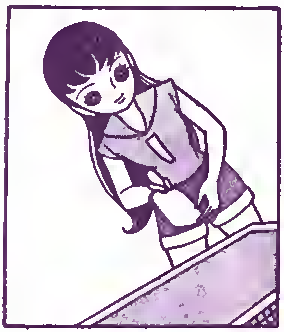
Ayako's eyes are brimming with piercing hostility as she faces Yukiko
If she doesn't take this set, she'll have lost three straight sets to Yukiko.
Michiko Takahashi

Yukiko keenly senses Ayako's hostility, and her own defiant response flares within her breast. The match isn't the only source of Ayako's hostility.....


of an upper-classman, Maki Chikage.....
they're also competing for the love



Yukiko senses wordless support in Maki Chikage's smile, and her courage is multiplied a hundred-fold as she awaits Ayako's serve



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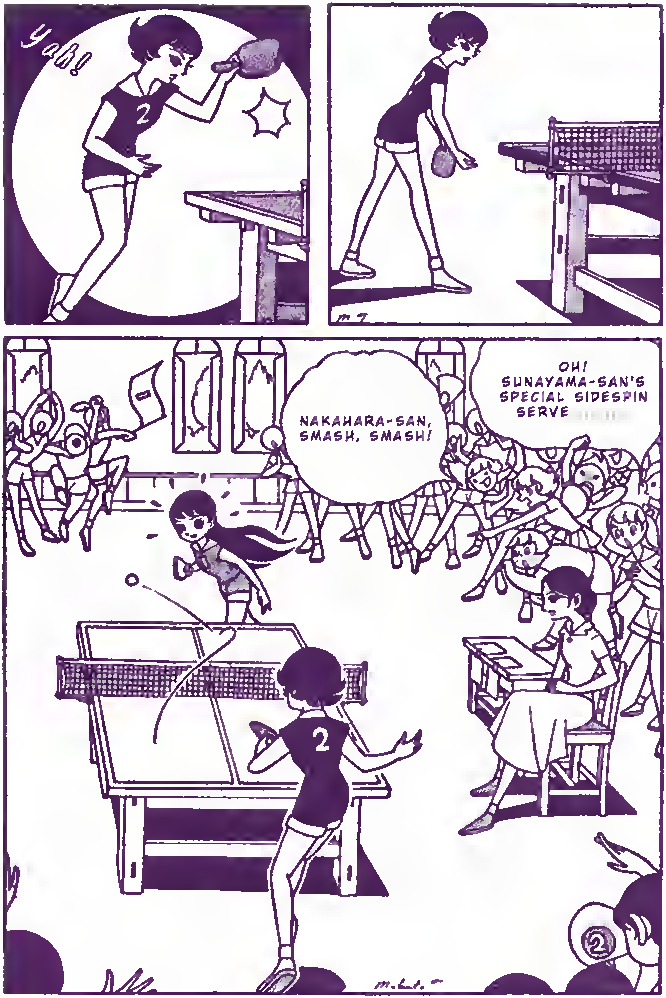
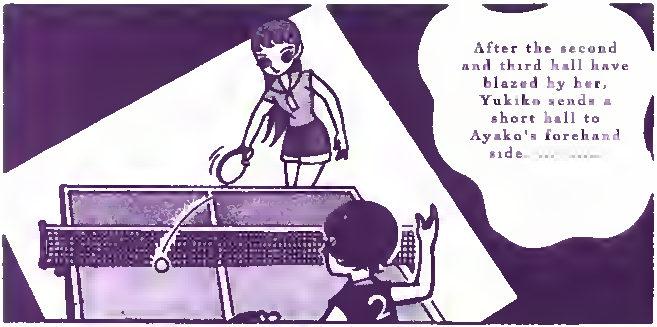
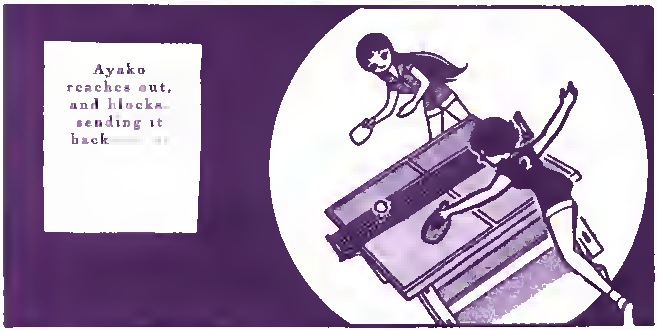
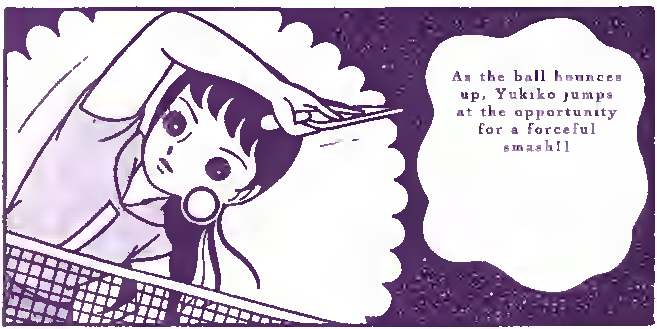
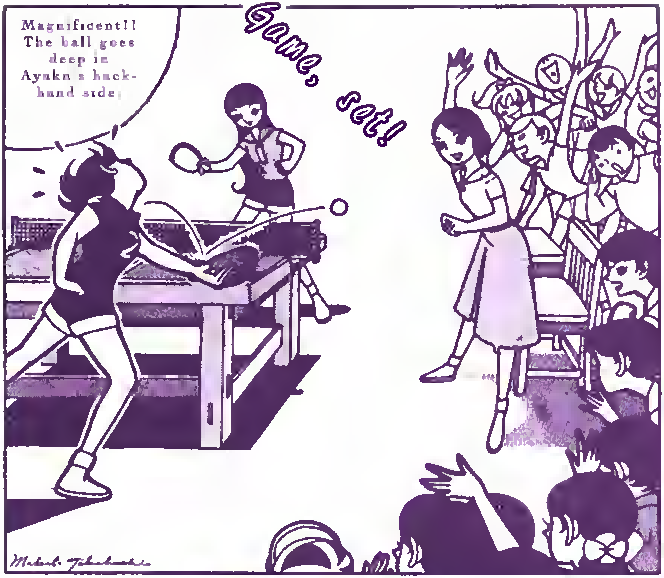
* In this case, "Onee-sama" is a term used to respectfully address or refer to an older girl, particularly a girl you admire

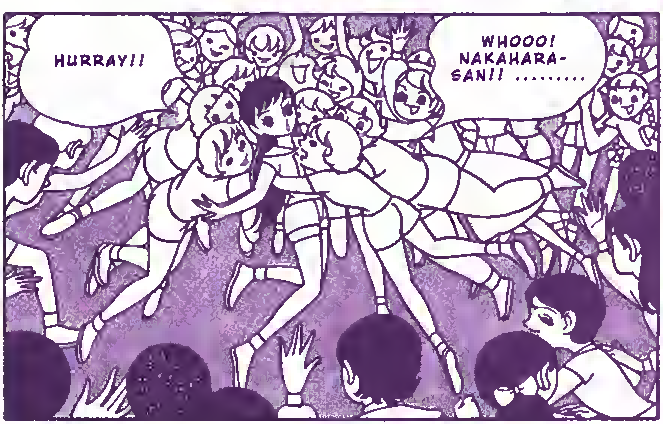

Yah!
2
m.T.
NAKAHARA-SAN, SMASH, SMASH!
OH! SUNAYAMA-SAN'S SPECIAL SIDESPIN SERVE
2
2
m.L.T.

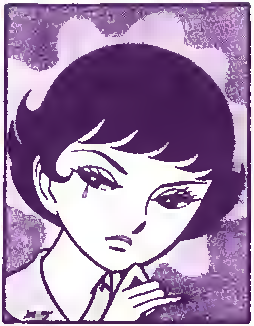

After the second and third ball have blazed by her, Yukiko sends a short ball to Ayako's forehand side.....

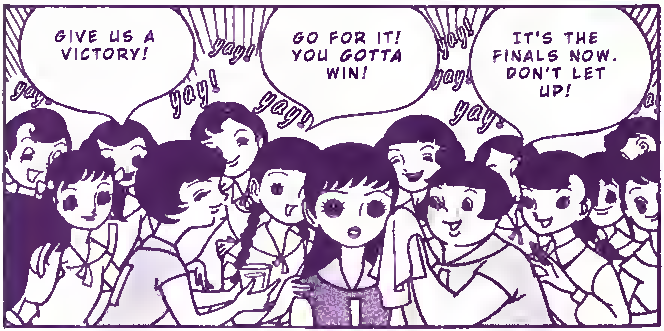

Ayako reaches out, and blocks... sending it back.....

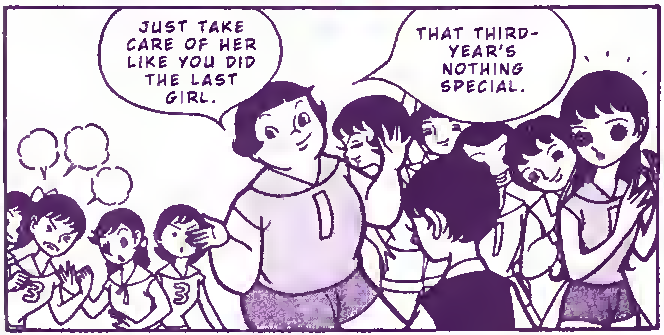

As the ball bounces up, Yukiko jumps at the opportunity for a forceful smash!!

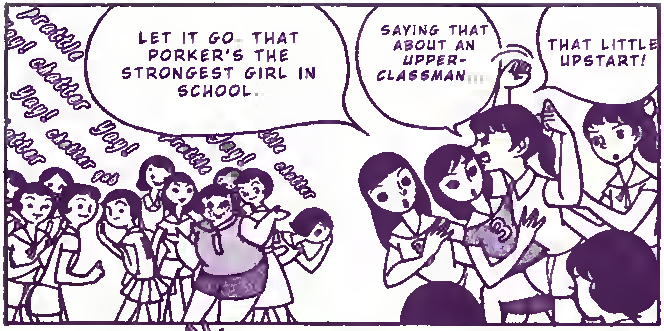

Magnificent!! The ball goes deep in Ayaka's back-hand side!
Game, set!

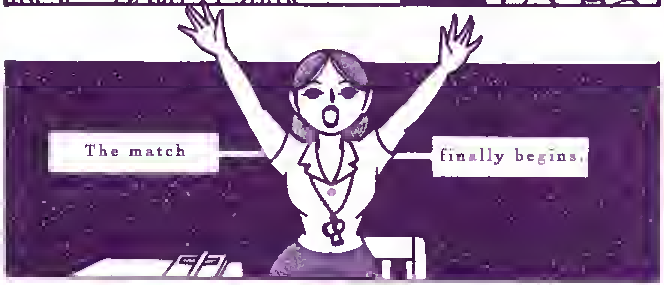

HURRAY!!
WHOOO! NAKAHARA-SAN!! .....

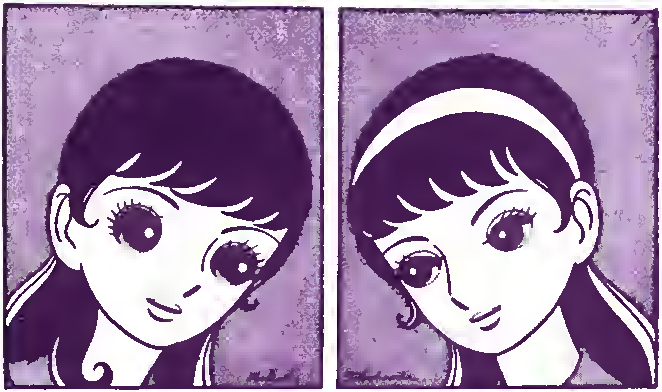



GIVE US A VICTORY!
yay!
GO FOR IT! YOU GOTTA WIN!
yay!
IT'S THE FINALS NOW. DON'T LET UP!
yay!

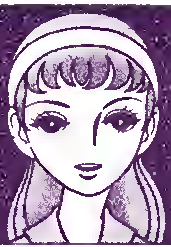

JUST TAKE CARE OF HER LIKE YOU DID THE LAST GIRL.
THAT THIRD-YEAR'S NOTHING SPECIAL.


LET IT GO. THAT PORKER'S THE STRONGEST GIRL IN SCHOOL.
SAYING THAT ABOUT AN UPPER-CLASSMAN...!!
THAT LITTLE UPSTART!
giggle chatter giggle
giggle chatter giggle
giggle chatter giggle
giggle chatter giggle


The match
finally begins.



but Yukiko just eeee a gentle smile in her eyee ……



Facing Chikage, Yukiko bowe her head a bit and greets her Chikage ie nervoue, ae one might expect,

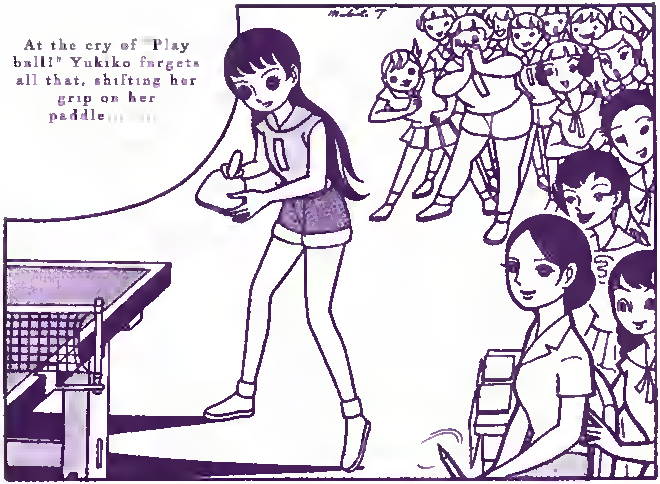
Chikage-sama My dear Chikage-onee-sama ……

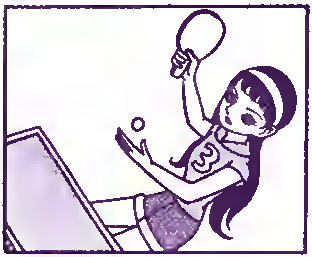
Yukiko'e cheet fiercely tightene, inexplicably ……

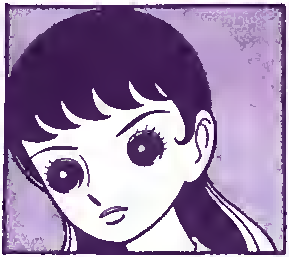
Play ball!

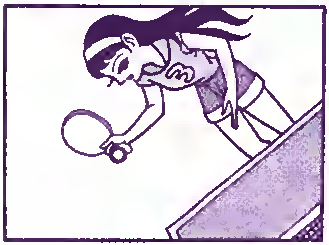
YUKIKO-SAAAN! NAKAHARA-SAN!

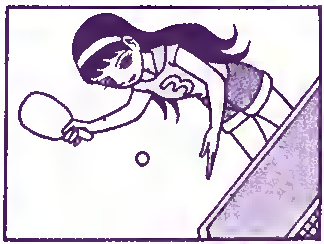
MAKI-SAN..……
CHIKAGE-SAAAN.……

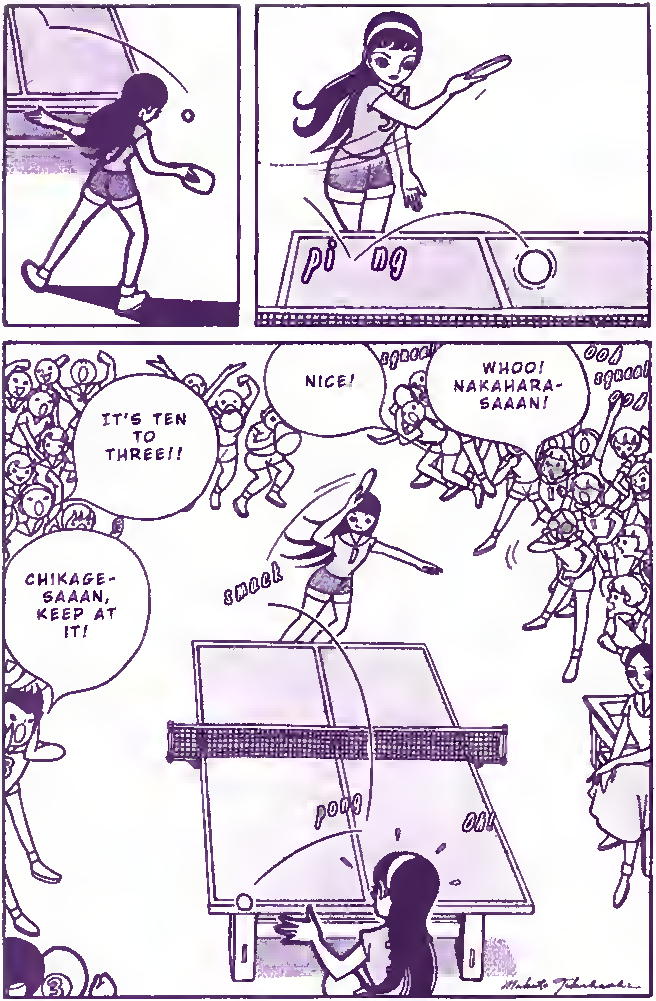

At the cry of "Play ball!" Yukiko forgets all that, shifting her grip on her paddle...




She snaps into position, bracing herself

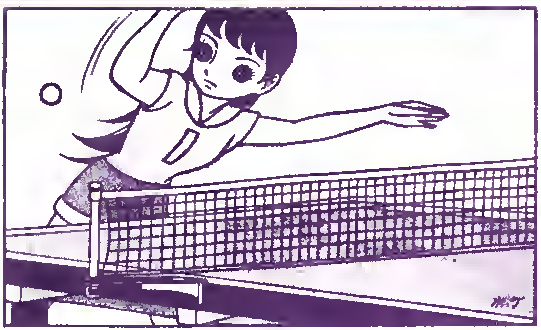





Pi
Pi
IT'S TEN TO THREE!!
NICE!
WHOO! NAKAHARA-SAAAN!
CHIKAGE-SAAAN, KEEP AT IT!
smack
pok!
oh!

Chikage, captain of the table tennis club, is unable to return Yukiko's battery of fierce shots, and Yukiko takes the first set by a landslide, 11-3 .....

"I'm doing well today," she thinks... and tries to barrel ahead and take the second set as well. However



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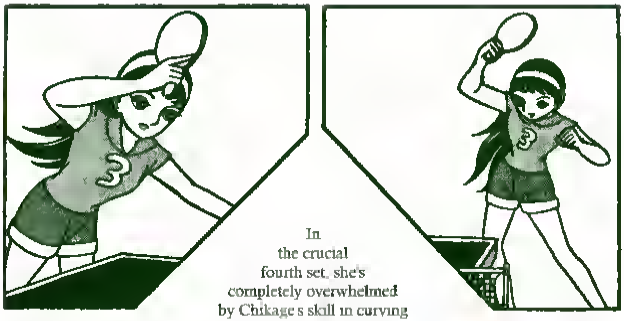
I WAS NEARLY THERE, BUT SHE CAUGHT UP AND THE GAME WENT TO DEUCE. AND THEN I LOST.....
She'll make it up in the third set, then!! But no. She perseveres, not letting Chikage get the winning points the first time the score reaches deuce. But the second time, a minor mistake costs Yukiko this set, too.....
HANG IN THERE.....!
GO FOR IT, NAKAHARA-SAAAN!
YUKIKO-SAAAN, KEEP AT IT!!
GO! GO! KEEP AT IT!
KEEP AT IT!
DO IT FOR ALL US FIRST-YEARS!
GO!
GO FOR IT!
IT!
GO!
SAAAYAN!
YUKIKO-SAAAN, KEEP AT IT!!
AT IT!
GO! GO!
GO.
SAN!
GO!
GO!

"This can't be," Yukiko thinks, losing her composure

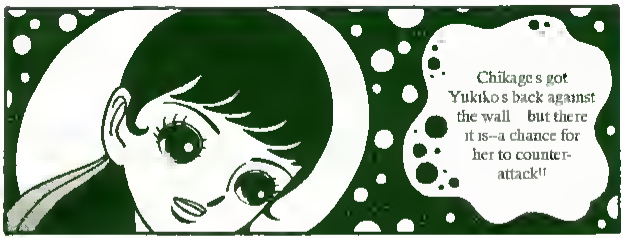
Her classmates' frantic shouts of encouragement only serve to deepen her anxiety

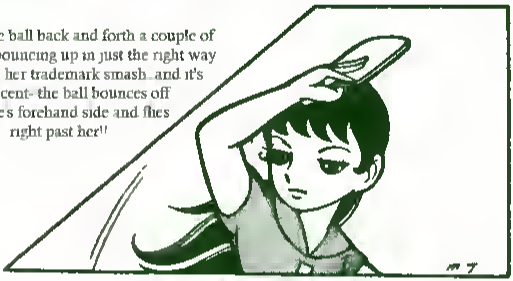
Yukiko tells herself to calm down but to no avail

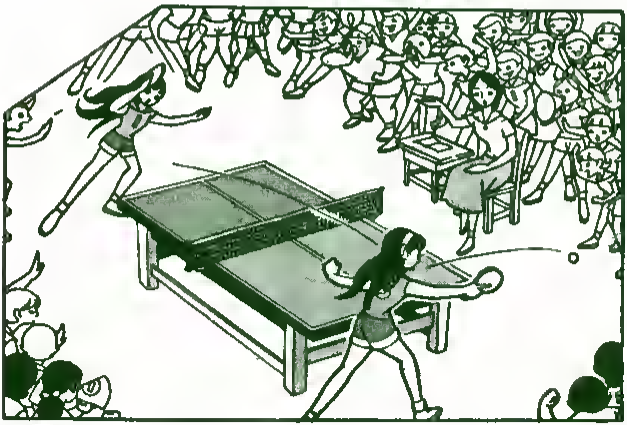


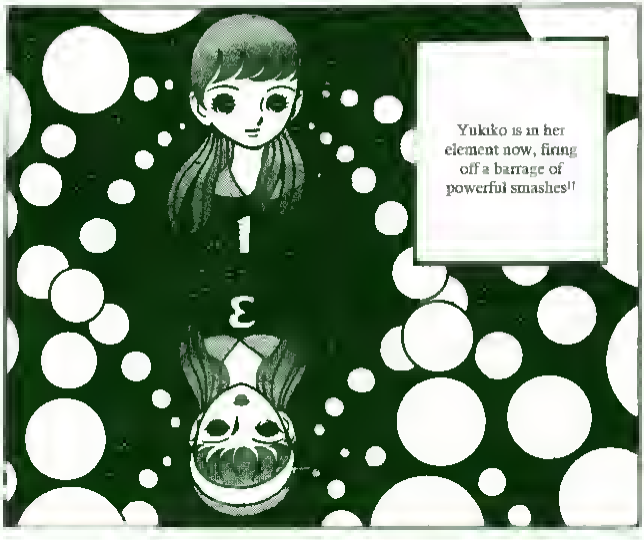
In the crucial fourth set, she's completely overwhelmed by Chikage's skill in curving the ball, and loses ground under Chikage's fierce assault

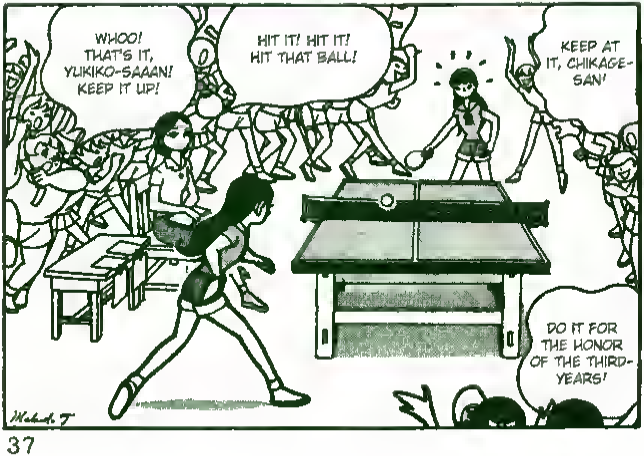
Her classmates' shouts grow despondent


Chikage's got Yukiko's back against the wall... but there it is--a chance for her to counter-attack!!


They've hit the ball back and forth a couple of times... and it's bouncing up in just the right way... Yukiko does her trademark smash...and it's magnificent--the ball bounces off Chikage's forehand side and flies right past her!!

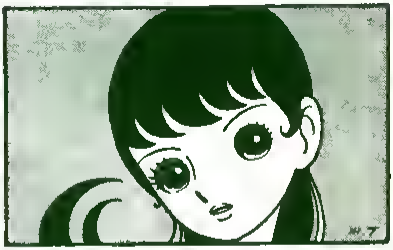


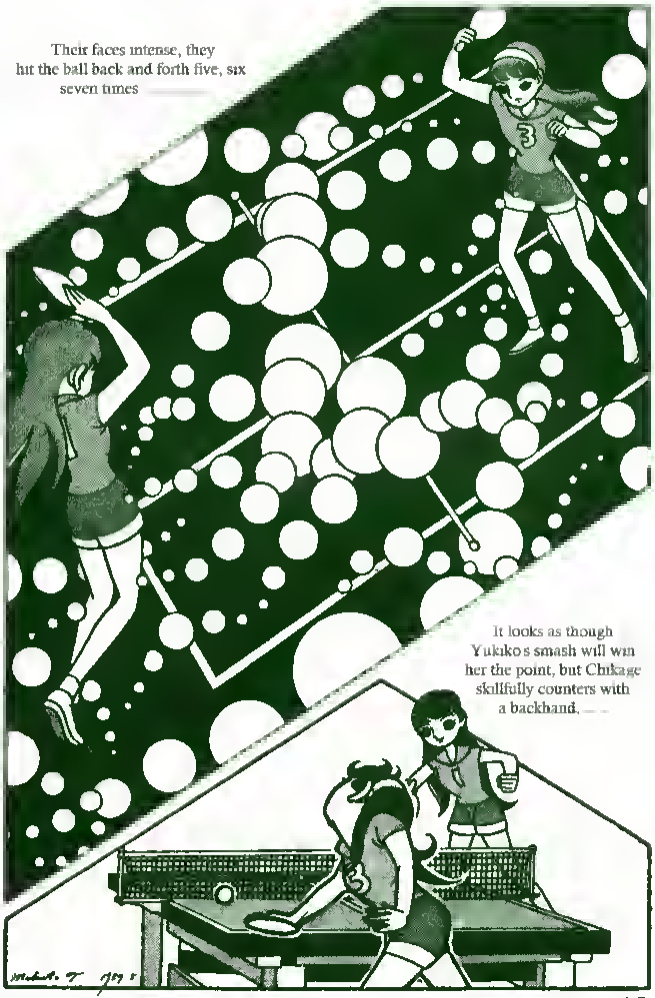

Yukiko is in her element now, firing off a barrage of powerful smashes!!

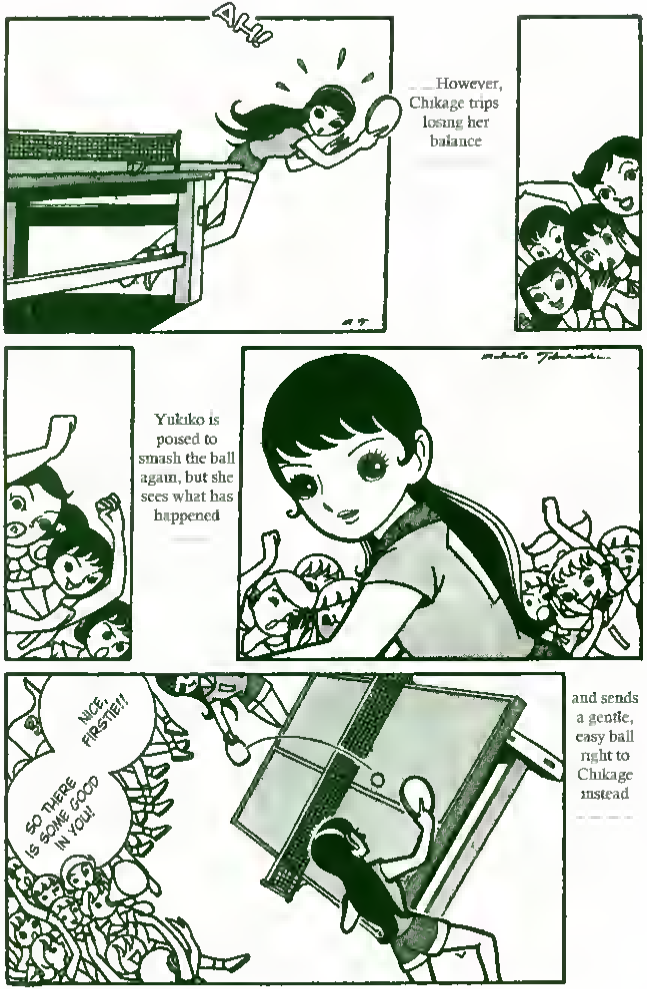

WHOO! THAT'S IT, YUKIKO-SAAAN! KEEP IT UP!
HIT IT! HIT IT! HIT THAT BALL!
KEEP AT IT, CHIKAGE-SAN!
DO IT FOR THE HONOR OF THE THIRD-YEARS!

How formidable she is when she's in her element. Before, her classmates cheers only added to her anxiety, but now...
Now, they spur me onward, bolstering my morale.....
It's just the opposite for Chikage onee-sama I'm sure——

But she's always so calm and collected. Maybe she isn't flustered now

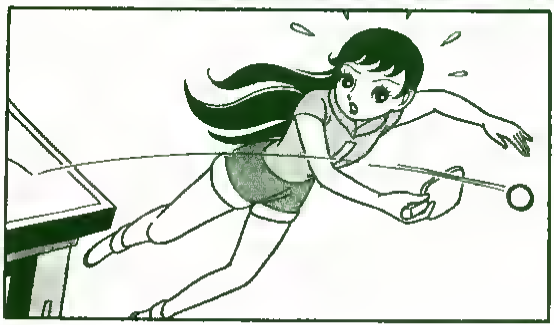



Their faces intense, they hit the ball back and forth five, six seven times
It looks as though Yukiko's smash will win her the point, but Chikage skillfully counters with a backhand.

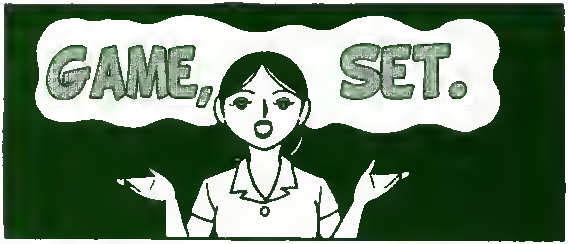

Ah!!
...However, Chikage trips losing her balance
Yukiko is poised to smash the ball again, but she sees what has happened
and sends a gentle, easy ball right to Chikage instead
NICE, FIRSTIE!!
SO THERE IS SOME GOOD IN YOU!

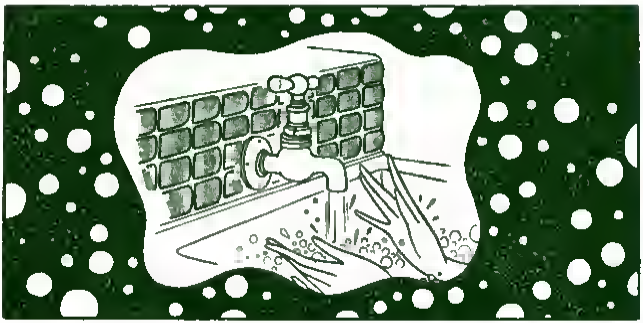
Chikage recovers, and the heated battle resumes

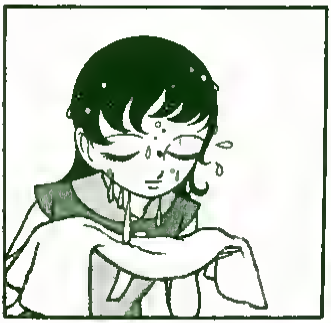
But Yukiko falls before Chikage's fierce assault

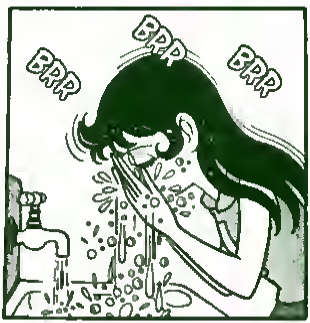


"Game, set," at last

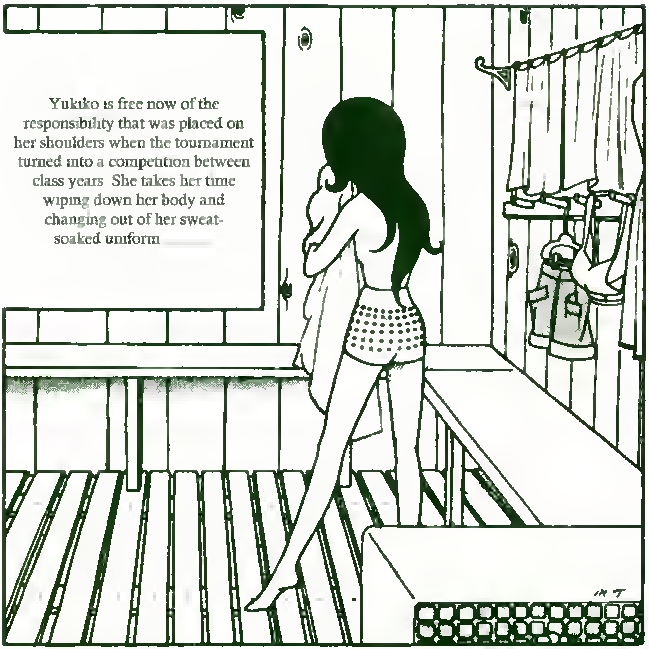


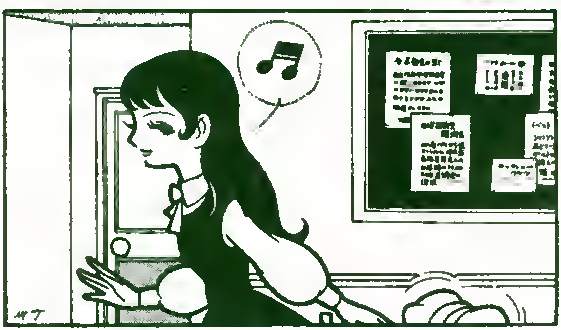






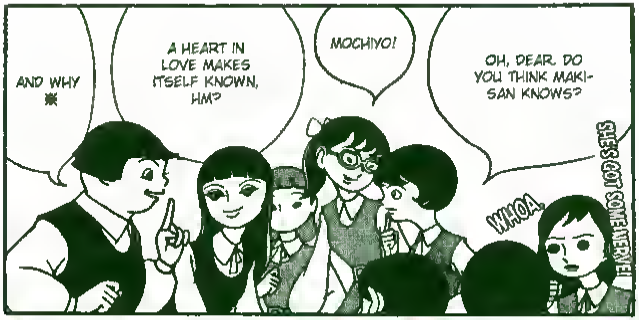
Yukiko vigorously twists the tap open and scrubs her face. The peace of knowing that it's over and done with eclipses her disappointment at having lost.


Yukiko is free now of the responsibility that was placed on her shoulders when the tournament turned into a competition between class years. She takes her time wiping down her body and changing out of her sweat-soaked uniform


then heads off to the classroom, a spring in her step

But at the door of the classroom, she gasps and freezes in her tracks

YOU SAID IT!
YUKIKO-SAN BEAT SUNAYAMA-SAN 3-0, AND THEN YOU SAW HOW SHE LOST TO MAKI-SAN. NO MATTER HOW YOU LOOK AT IT, THERE'S SOMETHING FISHY GOING ON THERE.....
UH-HUH
UH-HUH
NO, SHE DID IT ON PURPOSE. SHE THREW THE GAME FOR HER.....
MAYBE JUST STANDING BEFORE MAKI-SAN GOT YUKIKO-SAN'S HEART POUNDING AND HER HANDS TREMBLING. THAT WOULD DO IT

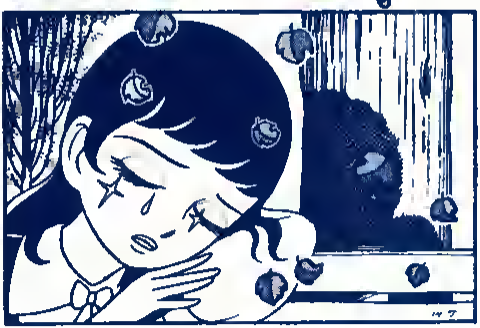

AND WHY ❋
A HEART IN LOVE MAKES ITSELF KNOWN, HM?
MOCHIYO!
OH, DEAR. DO YOU THINK MAKI-SAN KNOWS?
SHE'S GOT SOMEBRAIN!!
WHOA!

IF SHE'D SMASHED THE BALL WHEN MAKI-SAN TRIPPED. SHE MIGHT'VE WON ♣
YOU'RE RIGHT
❋ WOULD YUKIKO-SAN BOTHER TO THROW THE GAME IF MAKI-SAN DIDN'T KNOW?
HMPH
♣ OH IT'S THE SAME EITHER WAY. ♣
♣ SHE LOST ON PURPOSE

IS SHE THAT DESPERATE FOR MAKI-SAN TO LIKE HER?
YEAH! YEAH!
HOW DESPICABLE! WHAT POOR SPORTSMAN-SHIP!
SHE'S SO IMPERTINENT!!
WELL I GUESS YUKIKO-SAN'S REPAID THAT FAVOR SHE OWED HER NOW!
THAT'S RIGHT. THE TRUTH IS .....
HUH? SHE OWED HER..... A FAVOR?

Her classmates' cruel words lash Yukiko's heart like the blows of a whip The blood rapidly drains from her face

Yukiko flees the building and dashes blindly across the playing field



She throws herself down on a bench at the foot of a poplar tree The dam breaks, and the tears she s been holding back pour out now in a flood

What a terrible misunderstanding—— No, what a terrible affront! Yukiko's heart is torn apart by the anger and sadness welling up inside her.

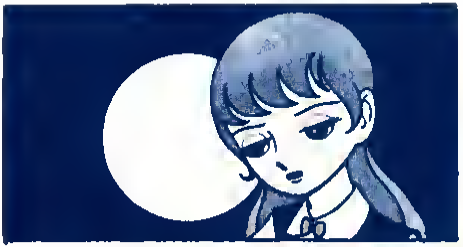
Yukiko couldn't clear up this misunderstanding even if she tried.....

Ayako is always glued to Chikage's side at practice. She's constantly fawning over Chikage and trying to gain her affection.
But this tactic has the opposite effect--it annoys Chikage and drives her away from Ayako.... Perhaps Ayako doesn't understand this and just thinks Chikage is favoring Yukiko....

However, as Yukiko sits there quietly thinking to herself beneath the poplar, the sunset at her back she can't quite dispel the niggling thread of doubt that Ayako-san might be right after all.....

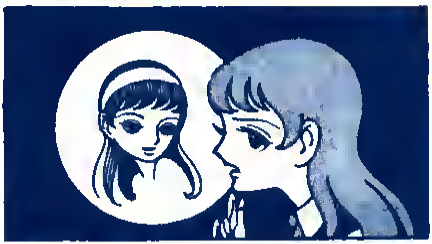
Did I lose the match to Onee-sama on purpose.....?
Did I truly face her with the same intensity as I did Ayako-san .....?

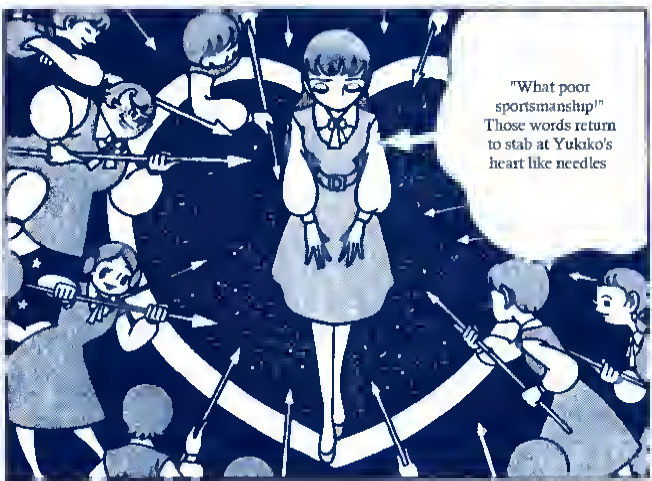
despite Yukiko's vehement words, anxiety is blooming in her chest like a droplet of ink in a glass ...



When Onee-sama tripped, I sent an easy ball right to her. Would I have done the same for Ayako-san ——?

What if I held back without even realizing it, just because it was my beloved Onee sama ——?



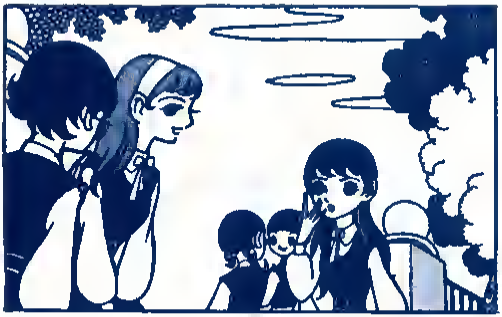


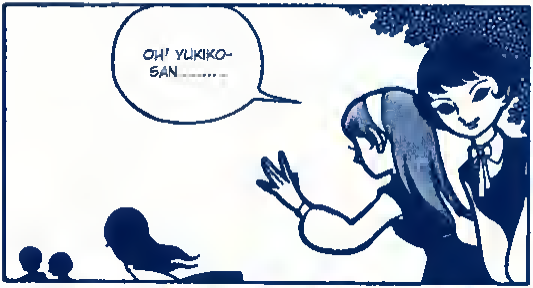
"What poor sportsmanship!" Those words return to stab at Yukiko's heart like needles

No, she can endure any insult to herself but if these accusations should cause trouble for Onee-sama

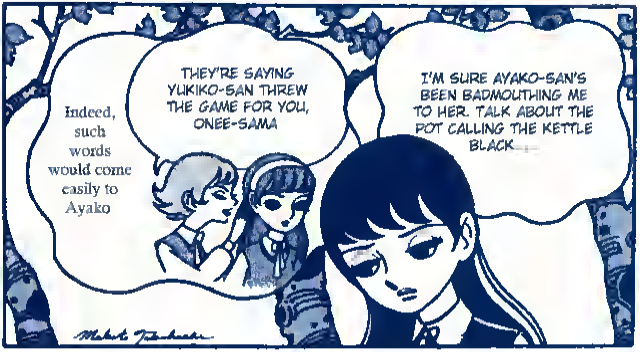
Yukiko s heart sinks

Yukiko spies Chikage at the school gate. The two of them usually meet there to walk home together, but today, it is Ayako who is by Chikage's side.....





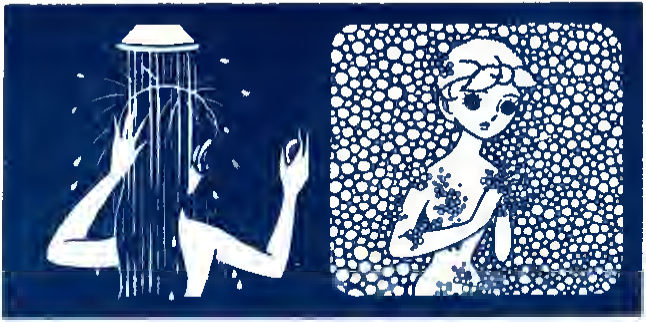
Yukiko takes off running, heedless of Chikage's call

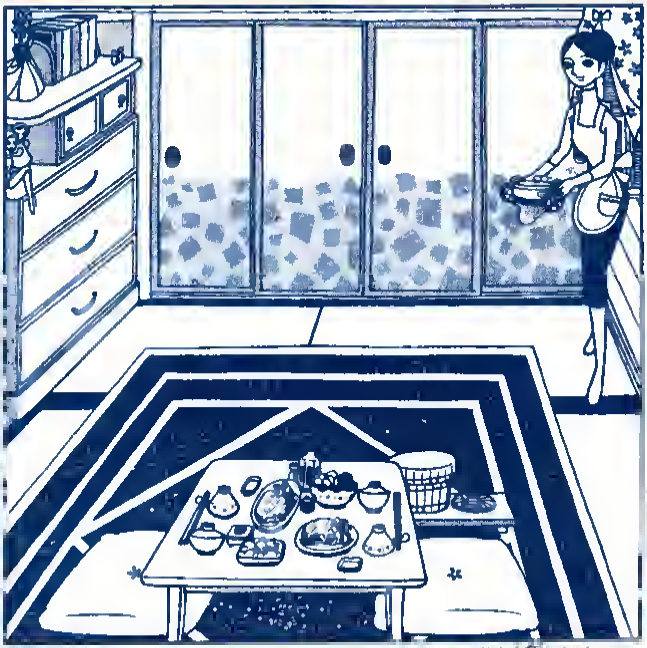

THEY'RE SAYING YUKIKO-SAN THREW THE GAME FOR YOU, ONEE-SAMA
I'M SURE AYAKO-SAN'S BEEN BADMOUTHING ME TO HER. TALK ABOUT THE POT CALLING THE KETTLE BLACK...

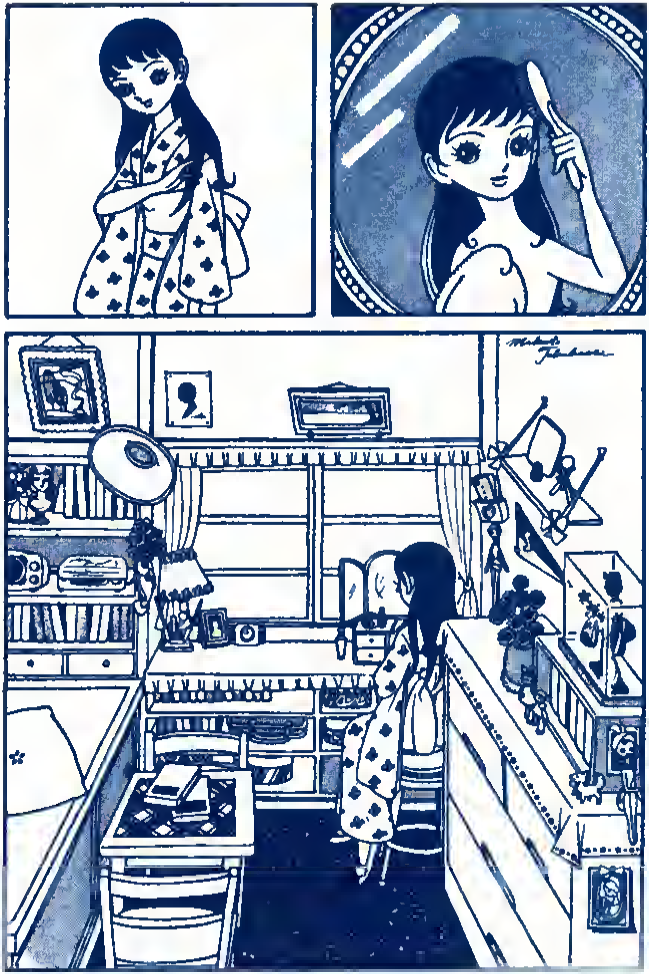
Indeed, such words would come easily to Ayako

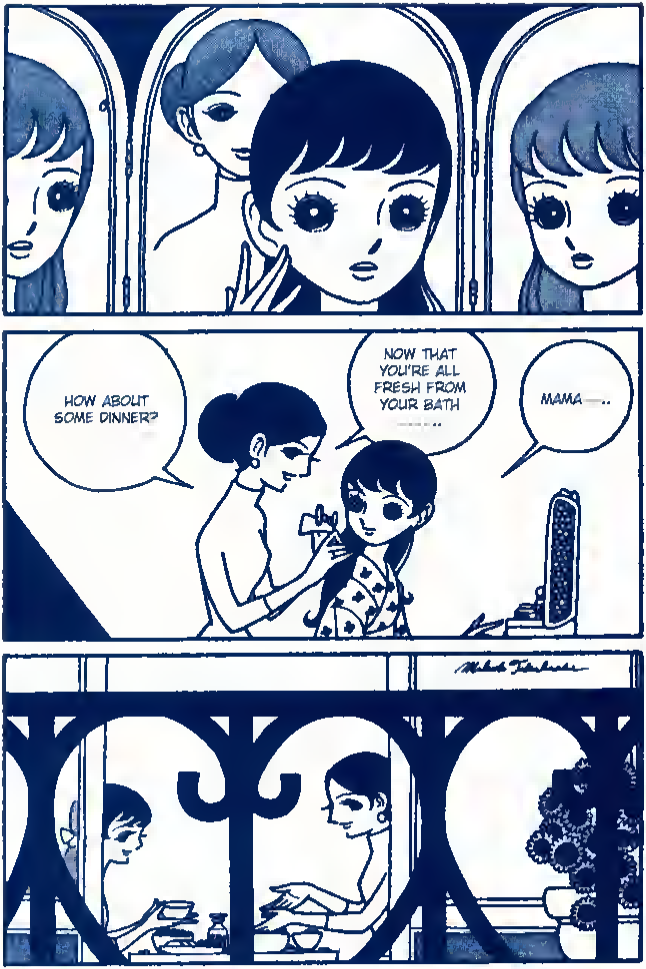
SEE, ONEE-SAMA? I WAS RIGHT. THAT'S WHY YUKIKO-SAN CAN'T FACE YOU.....
Oh, but why did I avoid Onee-sama, then.....? Onee-sama usually just ignores Ayako's backbiting, but my behavior must have made her wonder. Right about now, Ayako's probably saying.....

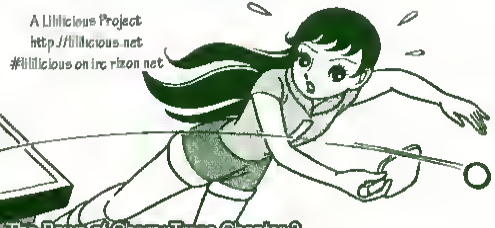
"I should go back now and tell Onee-sama how I feel," Yukiko thinks..... and yet her legs carry her down the tree-lined path to the station








HOW ABOUT SOME DINNER?
NOW THAT YOU'RE ALL FRESH FROM YOUR BATH ——..
MAMA——..



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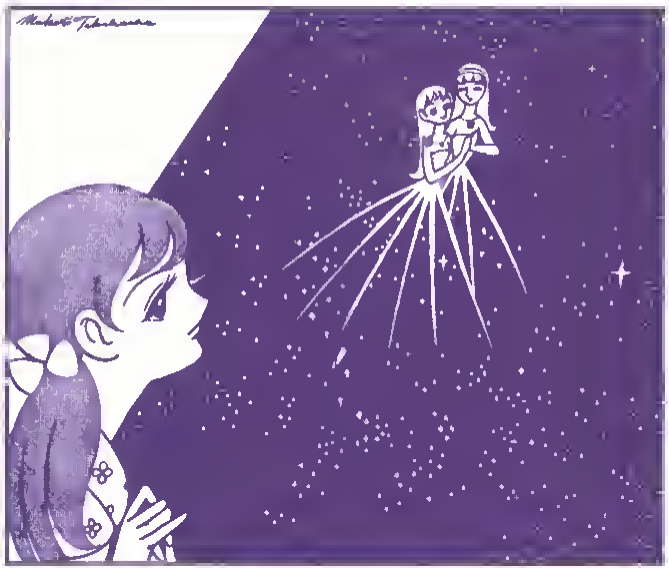
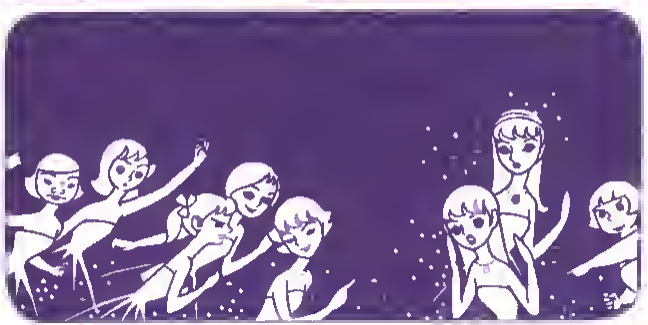
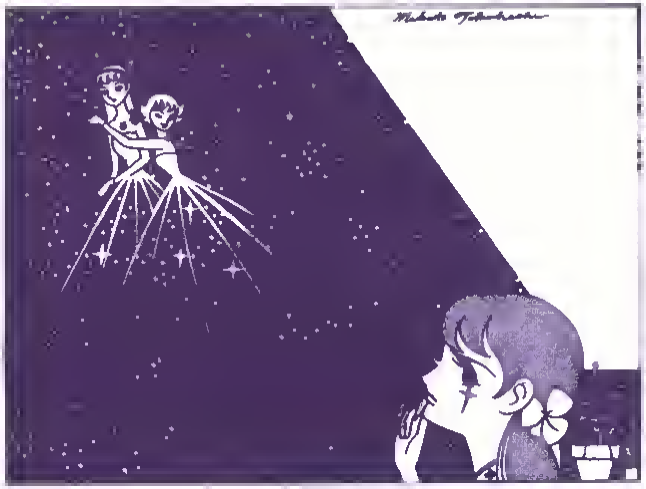
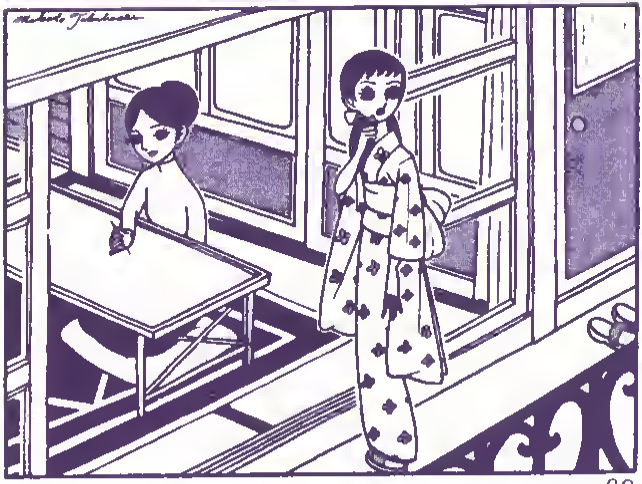





Makoto Takahashi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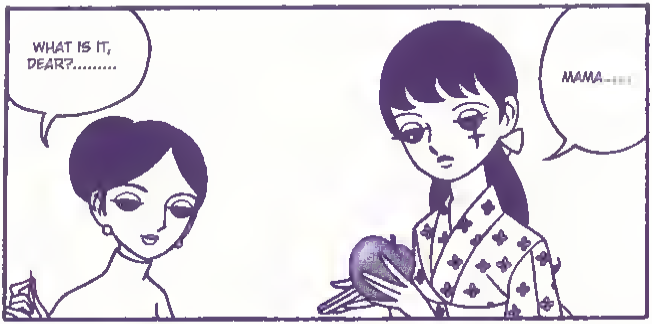
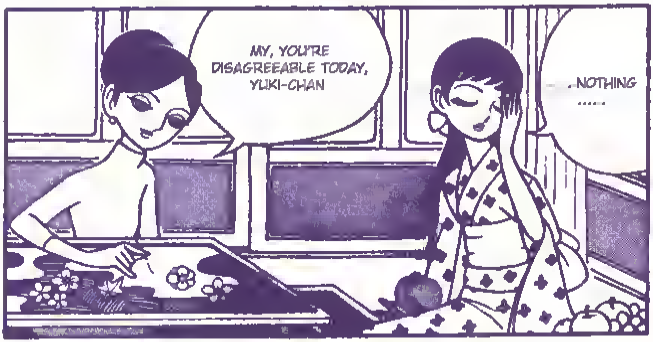
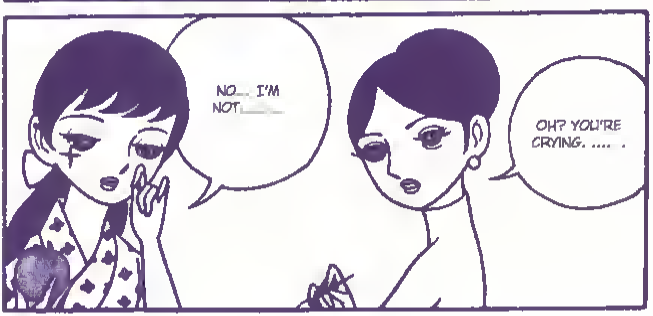
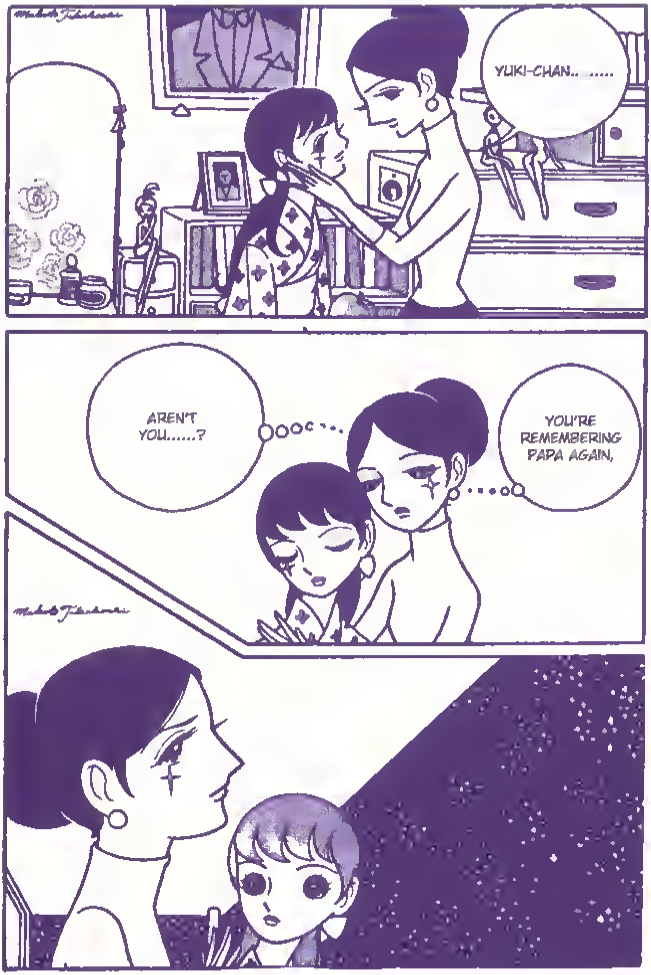
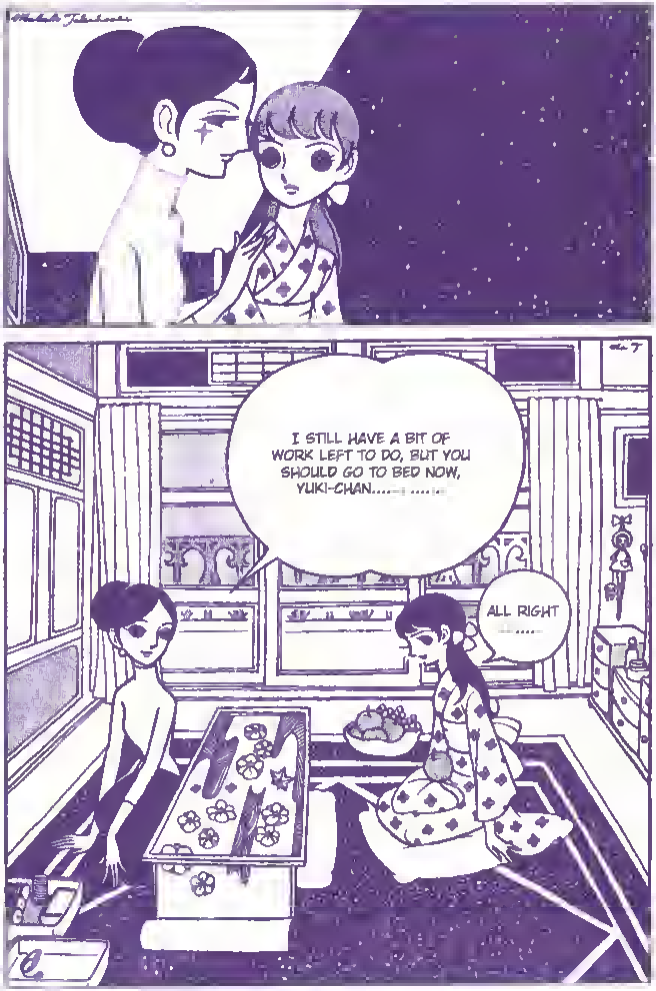
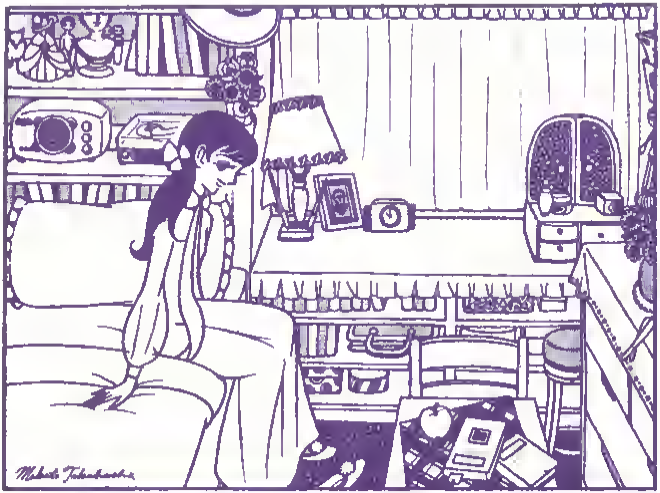

WHAT IS IT, DEAR?.....
MAMA...


MY, YOU'RE DISAGREEABLE TODAY, YUKI-CHAN
...NOTHING .....


NO... I'M NOT...
OH? YOU'RE CRYING. .....


YUKI-CHAN.. .....
AREN'T YOU.....?
YOU'RE REMEMBERING PAPA AGAIN,

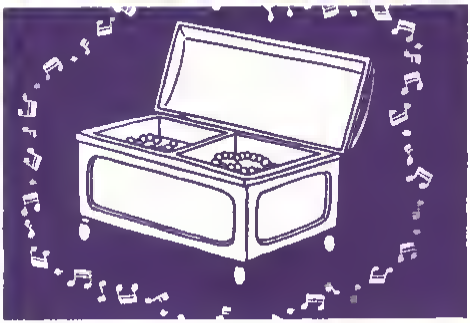

I STILL HAVE A BIT OF WORK LEFT TO DO, BUT YOU SHOULD GO TO BED NOW, YUKI-CHAN.....
ALL RIGHT



Yukiko's father was a college professor but he fell ill and passed away last year.

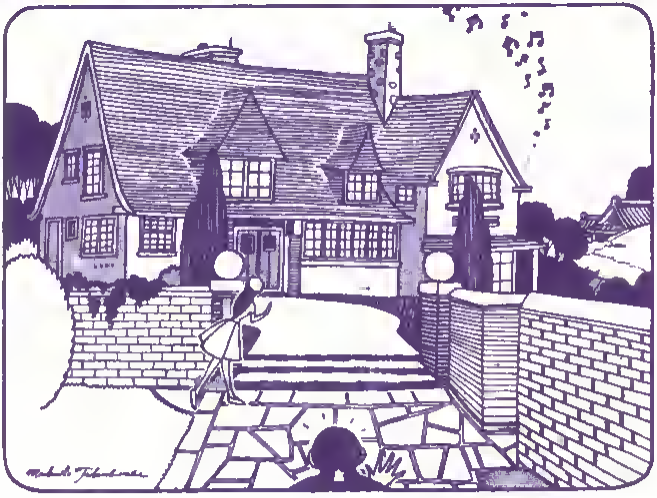
When Yukiko is feeling lonely or sad she listens to the music box her father bought her It plays Traumerei--Reverie! The melody makes Yukiko s loneliness and sadness melt away and whisks her off to the merry land of dreams

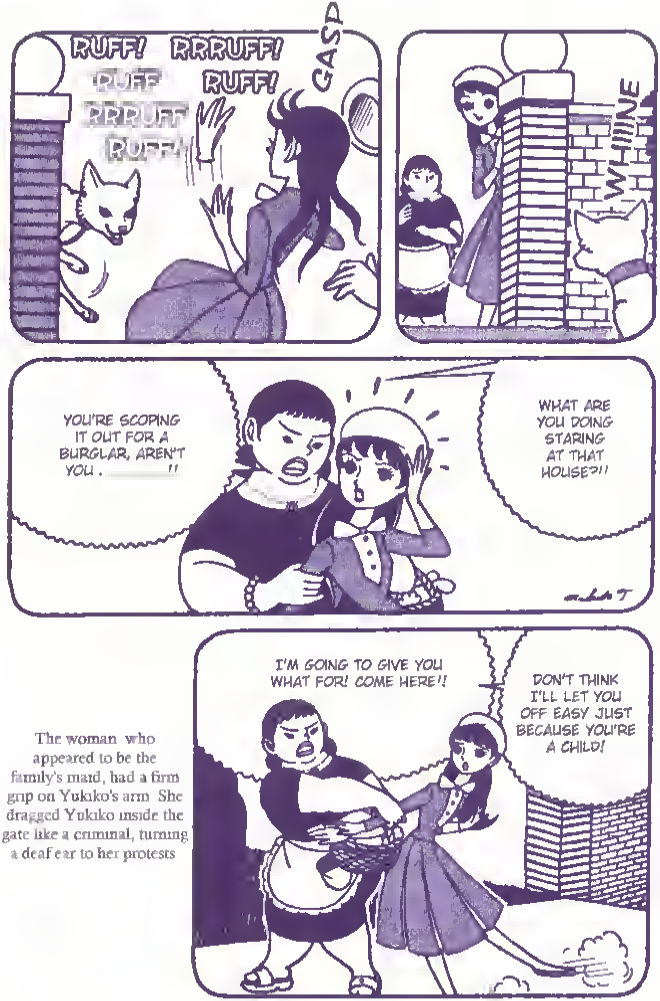
When Yukiko was in third grade, her father went to teach at Paris Sorbonne University as an exchange professor He bought the music box there and brought it back home for Yukiko She cherishes it



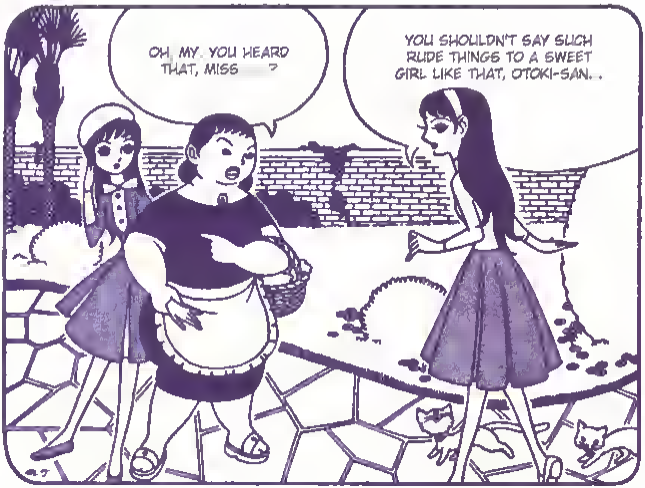
As Yukiko listens to Träumerei this evening the memories creep to the front of her mind, as they always do her father's kind face her first meeting with Chikage-onee-sama

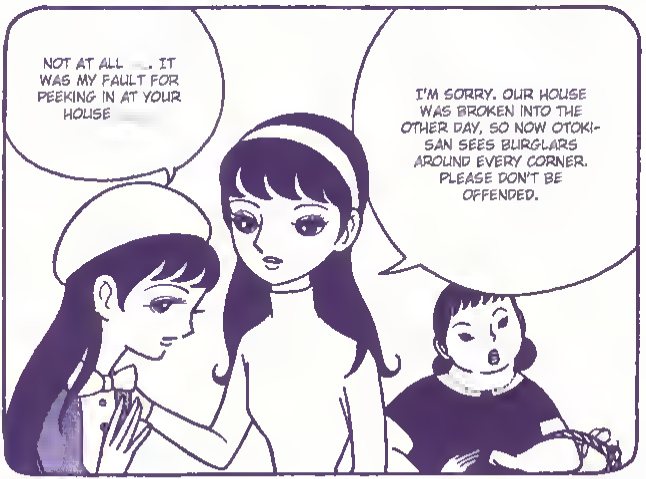
Yukiko first met Chikage-onee sama a year ago on the sort of early summer day when you can feel the invigorating green breeze brushing your cheeks, your hair, your whole body

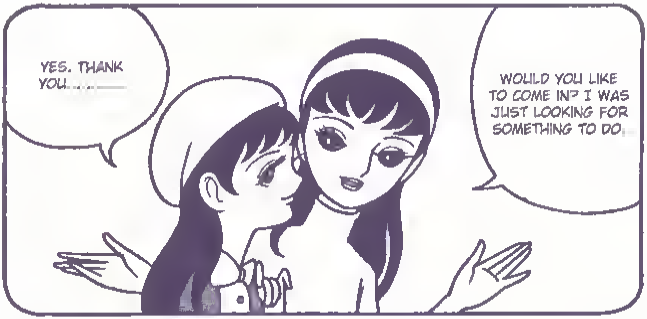


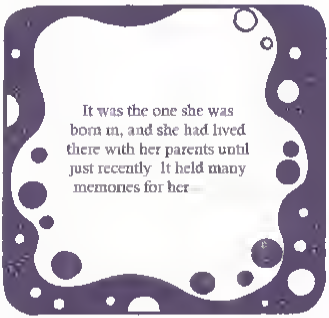

RUFF! RRRUFF! RUFF! RUFF RRRUFF RUFF!
GASP
WHINE
YOU'RE SCOPING IT OUT FOR A BURGLAR, AREN'T YOU.....!!
WHAT ARE YOU DOING STARING AT THAT HOUSE?!!
I'M GOING TO GIVE YOU WHAT FOR! COME HERE!!
DON'T THINK I'LL LET YOU OFF EASY JUST BECAUSE YOU'RE A CHILD!

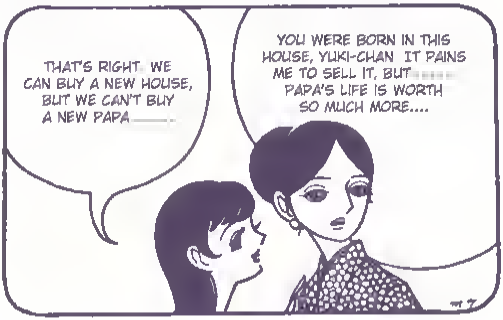
The woman who appeared to be the family's maid, had a firm grip on Yukiko's arm. She dragged Yukiko inside the gate like a criminal, turning a deaf ear to her protests.


OH, MY. YOU HEARD THAT, MISS ?
YOU SHOULDN'T SAY SUCH RUDE THINGS TO A SWEET GIRL LIKE THAT, OTOKI-SAN. .


NOT AT ALL . IT WAS MY FAULT FOR PEEKING IN AT YOUR HOUSE
I'M SORRY. OUR HOUSE WAS BROKEN INTO THE OTHER DAY, SO NOW OTOKI-SAN SEES BURGLARS AROUND EVERY CORNER. PLEASE DON'T BE OFFENDED.

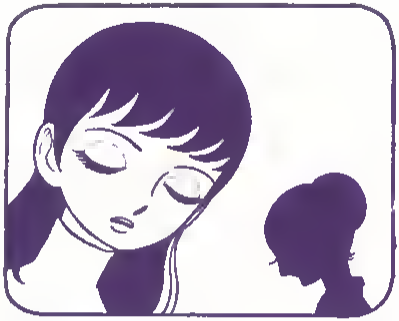




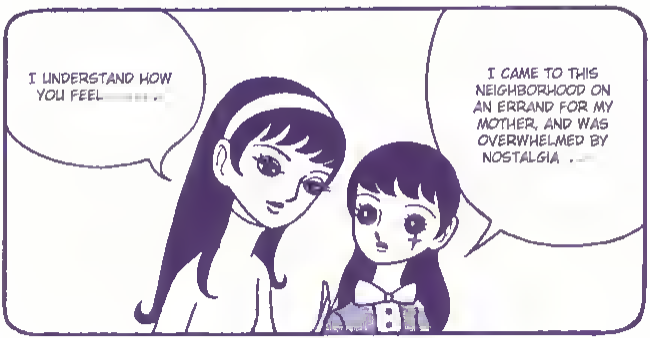

YOU WERE BORN IN THIS HOUSE, YUKI-CHAN. IT PAINS ME TO SELL IT, BUT..... PAPA'S LIFE IS WORTH SO MUCH MORE....
THAT'S RIGHT. WE CAN BUY A NEW HOUSE, BUT WE CAN'T BUY A NEW PAPA.....

When her father fell ill, they had to sell the house and move to a smaller one in order to pay the enormous medical bills

Yukiko answered her mother cheerfully to try and spare her at least that small bit of worry–her mother was worn down from years of looking after Yukiko s infirm father and trying to give her family good lives She had no idea of the true depth of Yukiko's sadness



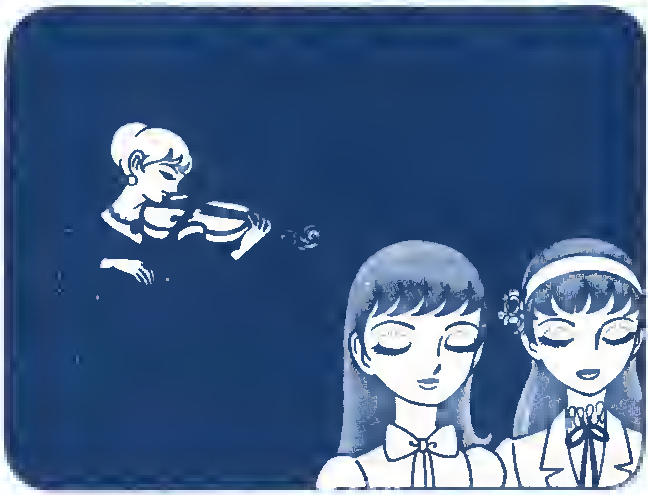
Yukiko s father underwent a second surgery but to no avail He passed away shortly after the move

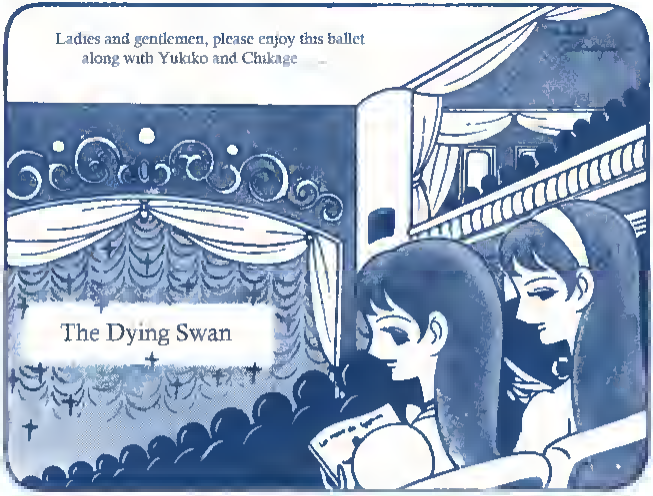


BUT YOU MUST HAVE MEMORIES ALL OVER, FROM THE PILLARS OF THE HOUSE TO THE LITTLE TREE IN THE GARDEN ....
I ONLY JUST MOVED HERE, SO IT'S DIFFERENT FOR ME,
YES.
NO, I—
COME, LET'S HAVE AFTER-NOON TEA
I HAD NO IDEA MY HUMBLEST APOLOGIES
LET'S HAVE SOME FUN TOGETHER AFTERWARDS
PLEASE, DON'T BE SHY—

Yukako and Chikage both only children were getting on like sisters in no time at all

15




Ladies and gentlemen, please enjoy this ballet along with Yukiko and Chikage
The Dying Swan

1) The swan quietly glides across the lake

2) She startles at the sound of human footsteps and tries to fly away,

3) but the hunter is quicker

4) And his arrow.....

5) She lacks the strength to fly away now.

6) She writhes in agony

7) She flaps her wings, but it is in vain

8) She has no more strength left.

9) She collapses, at last.

10) The hunter approaches to claim her.

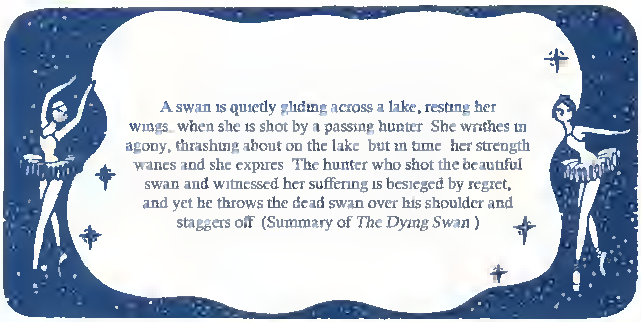
11) She flaps her wings one last time, but it is futile

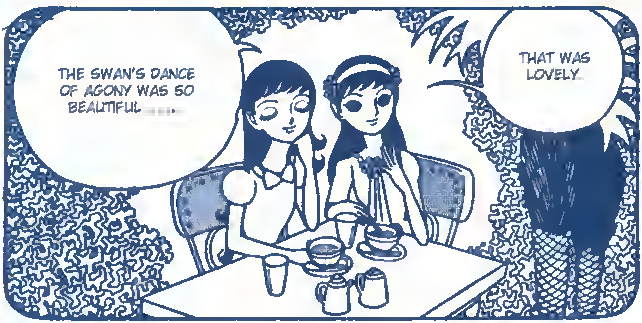
12) The hunter lifts her in his arms

13) The hunter prepares to take his leave, Michel Fokine

14) his breast swelling with grief and regret...

15) He cannot stand it. The swan falls from his arms.


A swan is quietly gliding across a lake, resting her wings, when she is shot by a passing hunter. She writhes in agony, thrashing about on the lake but in time her strength wanes and she expires. The hunter who shot the beautiful swan and witnessed her suffering is besieged by regret, and yet he throws the dead swan over his shoulder and staggers off. (Summary of *The Dying Swan*.)


THE SWAN'S DANCE OF AGONY WAS SO BEAUTIFUL.....
THAT WAS LOVELY.

IT LOOKS JUST PERFECT ON YOU!

A Lilliecious Project
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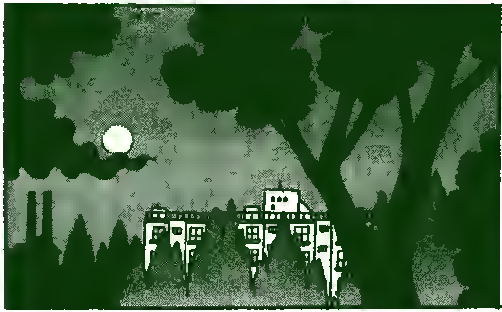
Sailor Pavalon
and Tim
Snowfairy

Chikage onee sama's father helped Yukiko's mother get a job at a trading company. She also earns a bit of extra money doing embroidery, a hobby which she learned back in her school days.

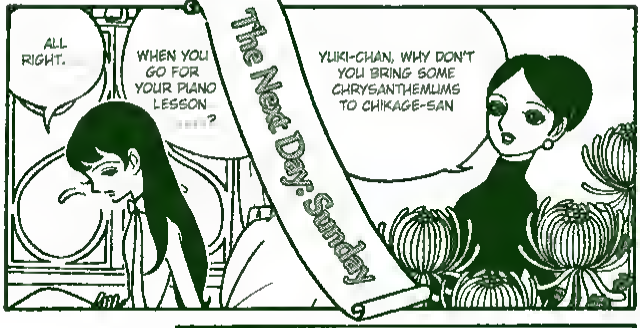


They recently moved from a small house to a relatively inexpensive, Western-style apartment.

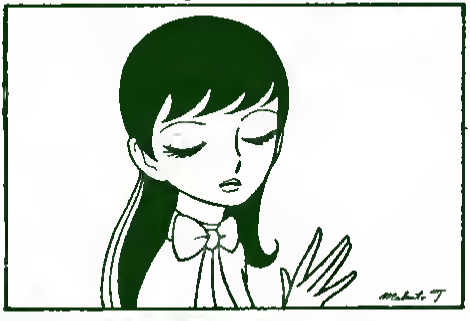
Yukiko decided to attend the same school as Chikage onee sama, Sakura Girls' Institute. She also joined the table tennis club, which Chikage onee-sama captains. Perhaps it's thanks to the intensive training that she's improved to the point where she's a contender for the top spot in the club.....

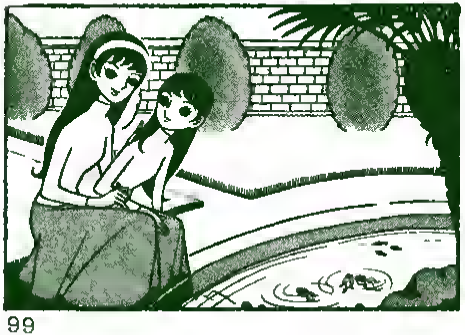
She and Chikage onee-sama faced off today to see who would be the winner of the table tennis tournament. However.....

Memories flitted through Yukiko's head. But by the time the music box quieted, she had fallen fast asleep.....


The Next Day: Sunday
ALL RIGHT.
WHEN YOU GO FOR YOUR PIANO LESSON...?
YUKI-CHAN, WHY DON'T YOU BRING SOME CHRYSANTHEMUMS TO CHIKAGE-SAN

Sundays are usually Yukiko's favorite day of the week. It's the day when she goes over to Chikage-onee-sama's house for their joint piano lesson.

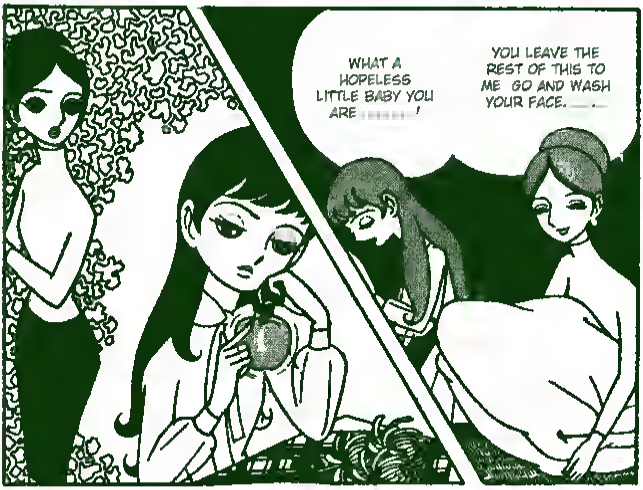


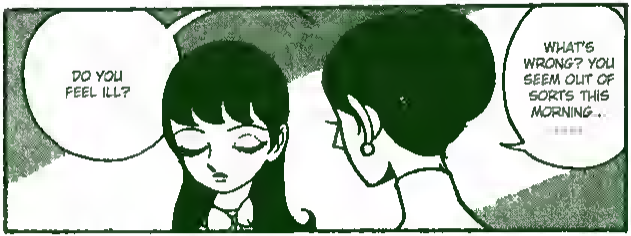


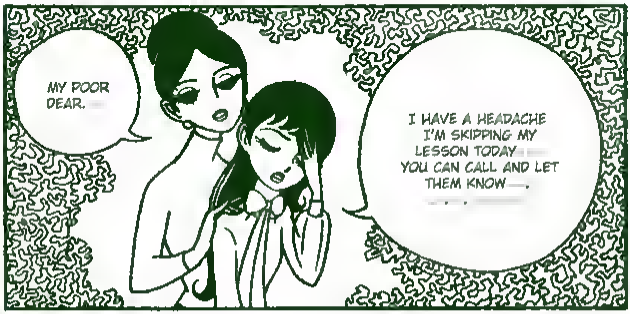
It's not the lessons themselves so much as the opportunity to sit and chat with Chikage-onee-sama that has her beside herself with joy.

Her heart is heavy She has no energy to face Chikage onee sama.
But she can't bring herself to go today She just lingers in her room
Makoto Takahashi
THESE ARE SUCH LOVELY, LARGE FLOWERS, AREN'T THEY? I THINK THREE SHOULD DO IT.

OH? YOU'RE STILL IN YOUR NIGHTGOWN YOU'D BETTER HURRY AND GET DRESSED!

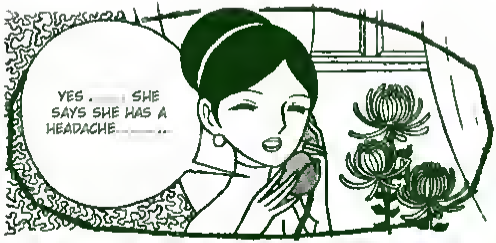

WHAT A HOPELESS LITTLE BABY YOU ARE.....!
YOU LEAVE THE REST OF THIS TO ME GO AND WASH YOUR FACE. —.—


DO YOU FEEL ILL?
WHAT'S WRONG? YOU SEEM OUT OF SORTS THIS MORNING..


MY POOR DEAR.
I HAVE A HEADACHE I'M SKIPPING MY LESSON TODAY YOU CAN CALL AND LET THEM KNOW.

YOU JUST SPEND THE DAY RESTING DON'T WORRY ABOUT ANYTHING
OKAY, MAMA

M. T
YOU MUST BE TIRED OUT FROM THE TOURNAMENT YESTERDAY

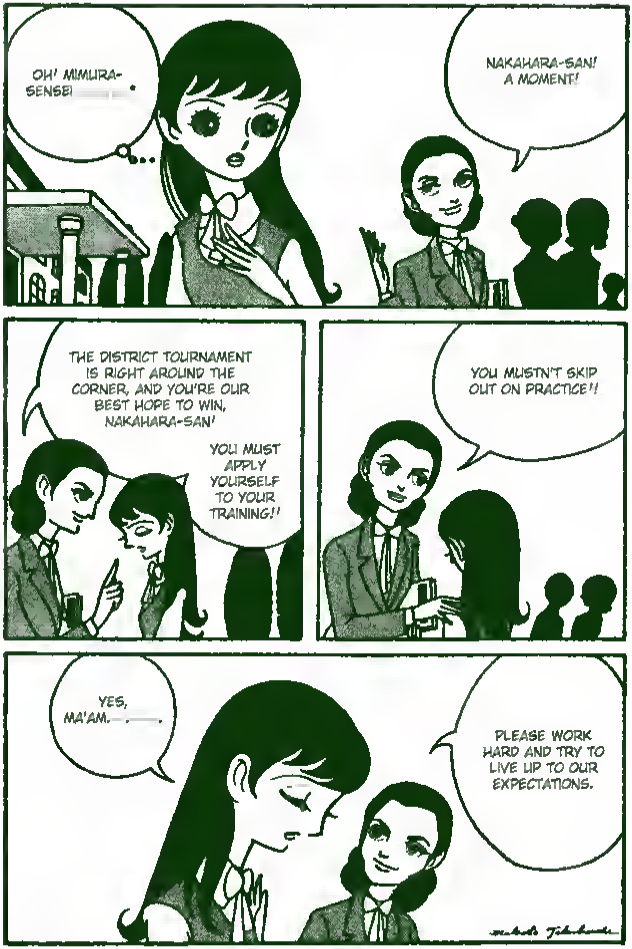


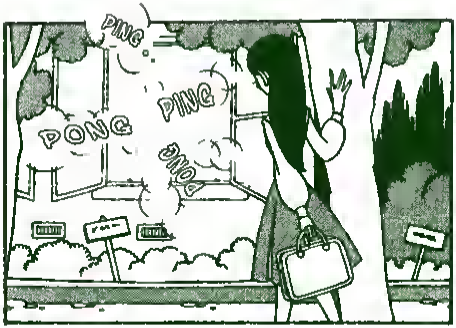
After that, Yukiko hears her mother talking on the phone.....

I want to see Onee-sama! I want to cling to her and cry my heart out on her shoulder... I want to beg her indulgence..... I wish I could tell her about the other girls' nasty backbiting and have her comfort me.....

Yukiko's heart trembles with love and yearning.

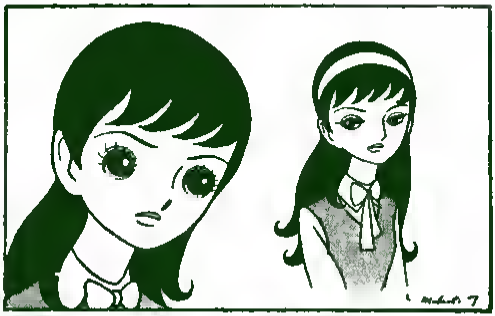
Nearly ten days have passed since the tournament now. Ten days of loneliness for Yukiko.....


OH! MIMURA-SENSEI
NAKAHARA-SAN! A MOMENT!
THE DISTRICT TOURNAMENT IS RIGHT AROUND THE CORNER, AND YOU'RE OUR BEST HOPE TO WIN, NAKAHARA-SAN!
YOU MUST APPLY YOURSELF TO YOUR TRAINING!!
YOU MUSTN'T SKIP OUT ON PRACTICE!!
YES, MA'AM.
PLEASE WORK HARD AND TRY TO LIVE UP TO OUR EXPECTATIONS.

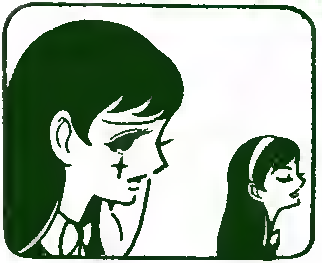


——Despite her acquiescence, Yukiko's legs suddenly grow heavy as she nears the table tennis clubroom, the soft ping pong sounds traveling to her ears

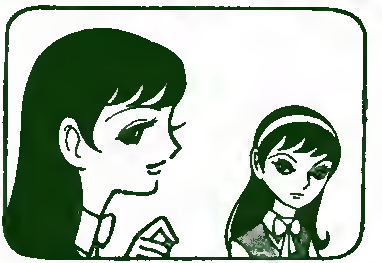
Every time Yukiko thinks about Chikage onee-sama's distant behavior since the tournament, her heart grows cold



When they ran into each other in the library around five days ago——

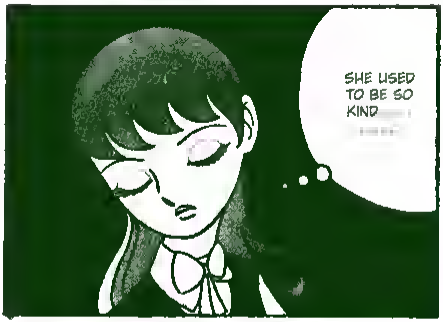


Yukiko tried to call out to her, but the words stuck in her throat.



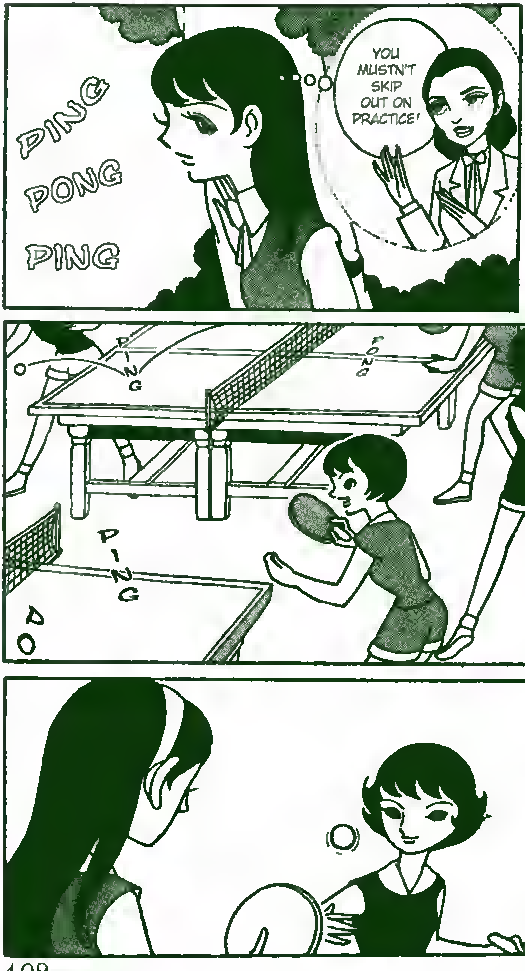
And when they met at the store she threw Yukiko a cool glance

Is she angry with Yukiko——? Does she despise her? Yukiko doesn't know, but she's crushed by Chikage-onee-sama's cold demeanor. Her heart is gray——



Yukiko has Chikage-onee-sama's schedule memorized. She knows what classroom the other girl is in at any given time, and where and when she might run into her——

but when she remembers Chikage-onee-sama's cold eyes, she grows timid. Faced with the frightening prospect of seeing Chikage-onee-sama, she deliberately avoids her.



Impelled by her teacher's words, Yukiko ventures a peek into the clubroom

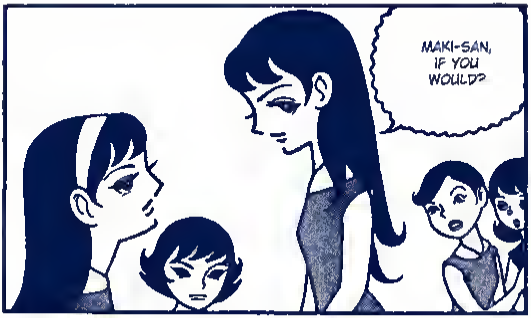
YOU AND I COULD PLAY AS A DOUBLES TEAM IN THE NEXT TOURNAMENT, ONEE-SAMA...
YUKIKO! WHY ARE YOU RUNNING AWAY?!

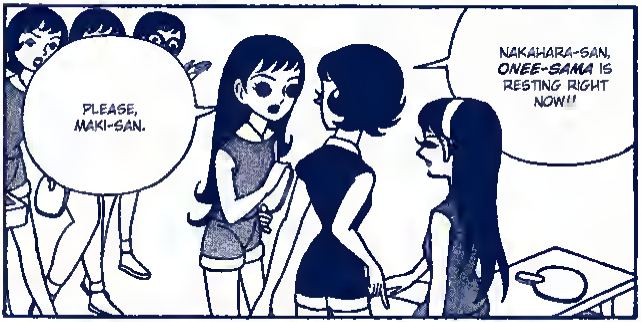
Having come to a decision, Yukiko turns on her heel and retraces her path to school

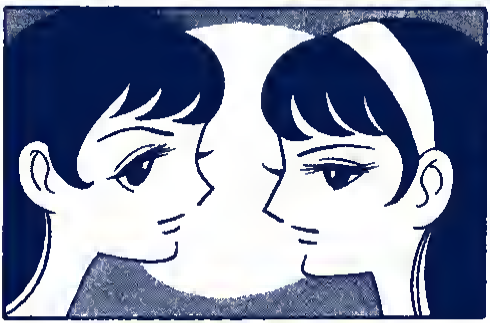
BONG
NO, LOOK OVER THERE
I KNOW THIS IS ONLY PRACTICE, BUT YOU HAVE TO PAY ATTENTION

CHATTER
CHATTER
CHATTER
CHATTER
WHISPER

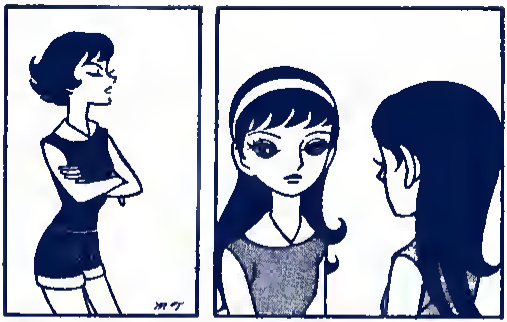
Yukiko calls her "Maki-san," not 'Onee-sama,' her voice trembling slightly



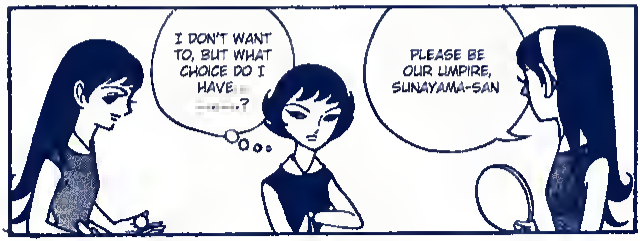


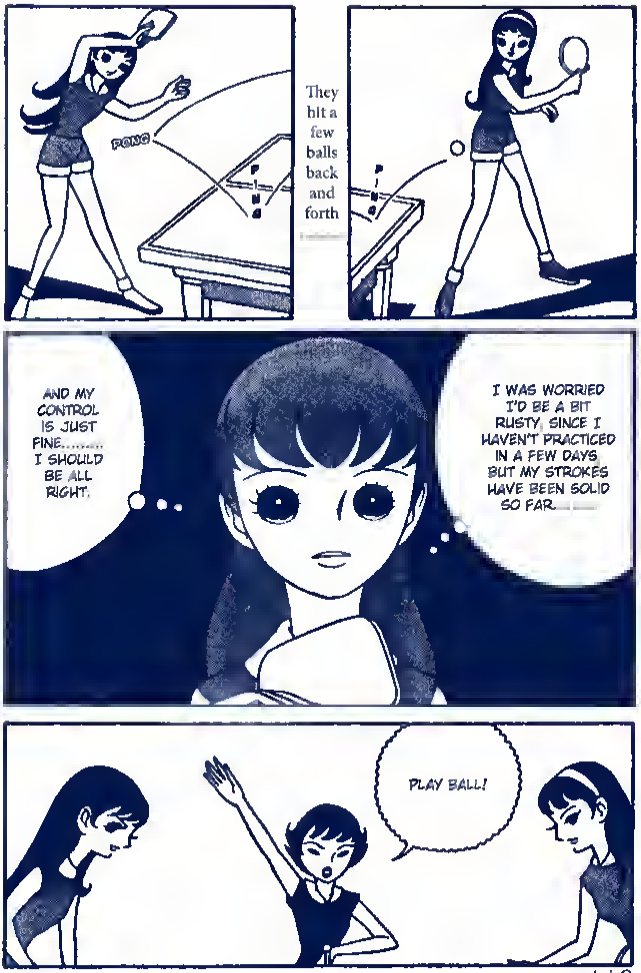


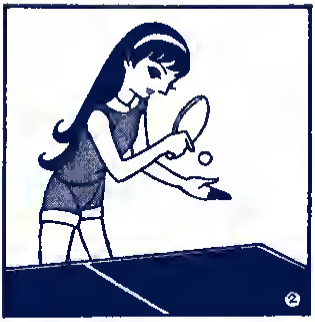
Ignoring Ayako's words, Yukiko stares at Chikage— Chikage stares back, looking surprised.

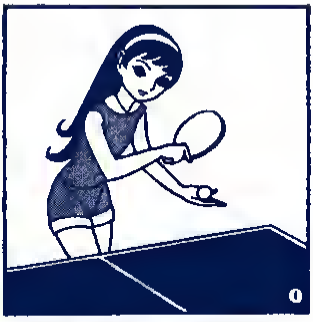

Chikage says nothing, but eventually nods, a glint of something like hostility in her beautiful eyes

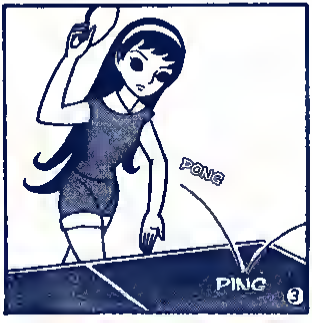
Win or lose, she'll have given it her all! And freed herself from the unease that's been twisting her stomach into knots!


I DON'T WANT TO, BUT WHAT CHOICE DO I HAVE...?
PLEASE BE OUR UMPIRE, SUNAYAMA-SAN

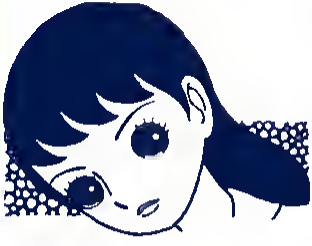

PONG
They hit a few balls back and forth
AND MY CONTROL IS JUST FINE..... I SHOULD BE ALL RIGHT.
I WAS WORRIED I'D BE A BIT RUSTY, SINCE I HAVEN'T PRACTICED IN A FEW DAYS BUT MY STROKES HAVE BEEN SOLID SO FAR.....
PLAY BALL!

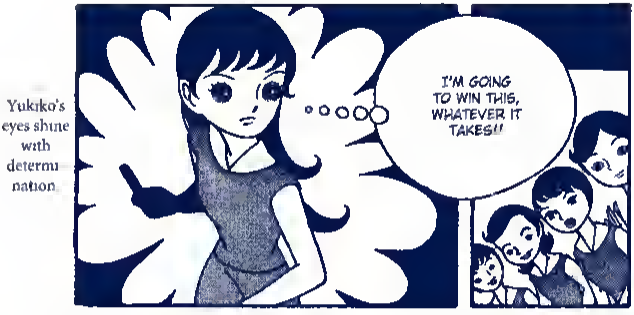




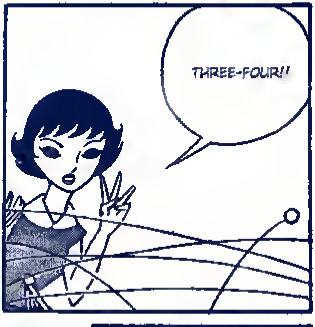


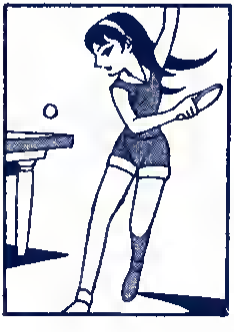
Yukiko fiercely returns
Chikage's skilled serve



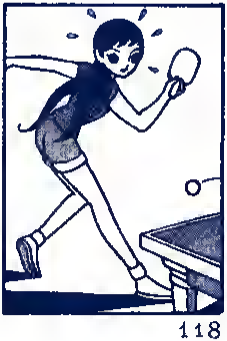


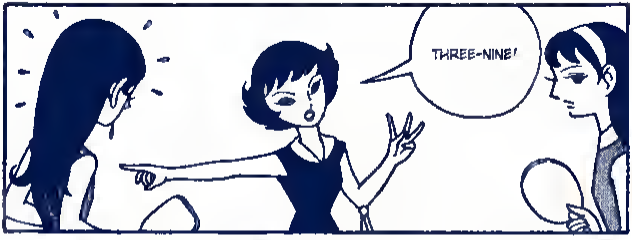
Yukiko's eyes shine with determination

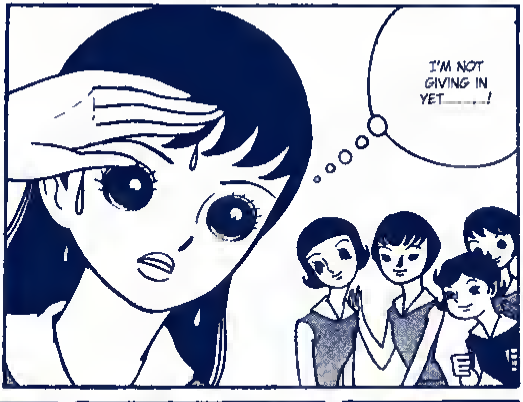




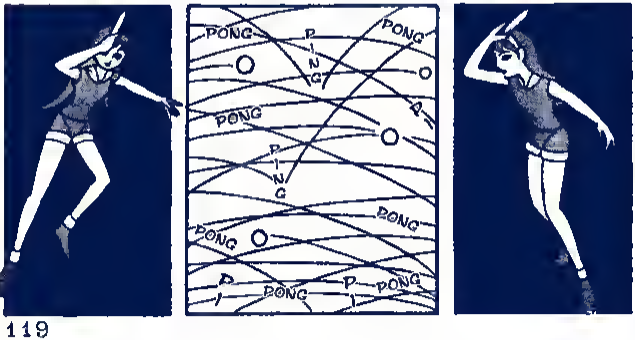
Yukiko's going all out, but Chikage's defense is like an iron wall, and Chikage's attacks are so fast and furious that Yukiko scarcely has time to breathe!







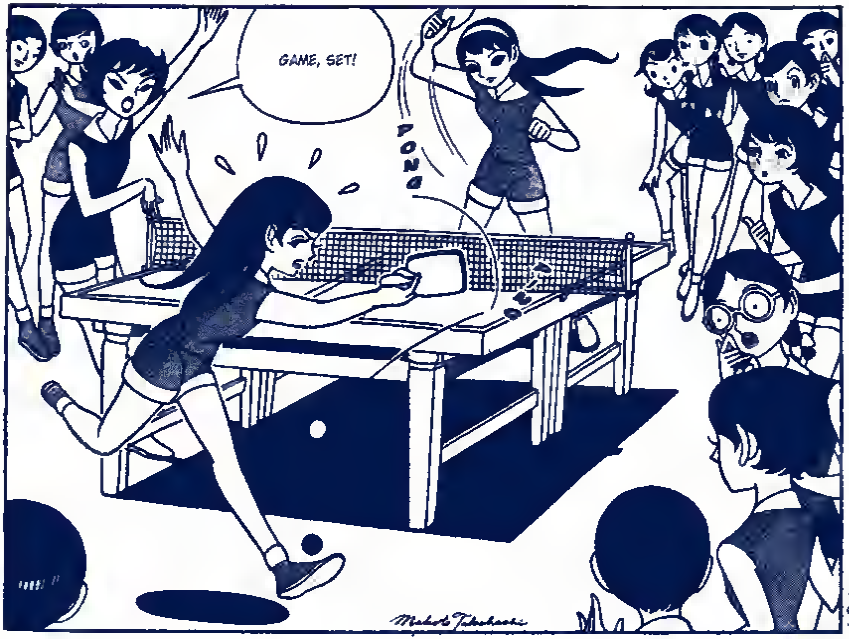
Down by 6 points, Yukiko gets one last spurt of energy. Her body thrums with it as she wipes the copious sweat from her brow.



Chikage's attacks are so fierce, they could set the ball aflame, but Yukiko is stubbornly holding her off——

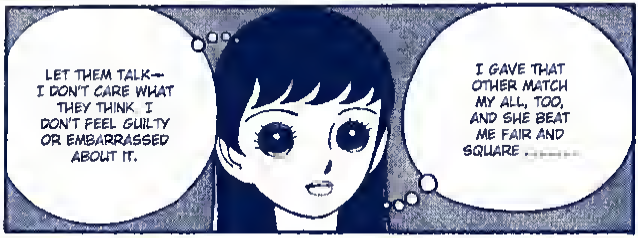
but Chikage's defense is impenetrable!

Yukiko sees an opportunity, and counter attacks with a powerful smash,

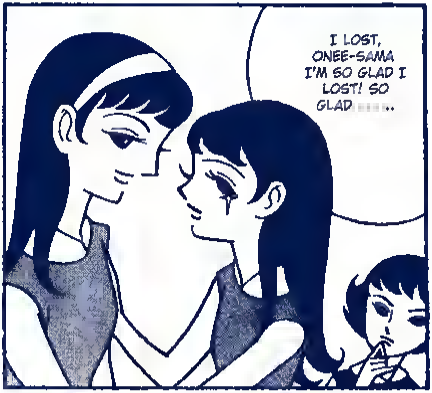


Chikage lures Yukiko backwards with a clever shot, then fires off another that grazes Yukiko's forehand corner and then takes off again like a meteor!

Yukiko feels the tension ease from her form fingertips, hands, arms, shoulders, all through her body, as the knot of emotion in her breast melts away.....

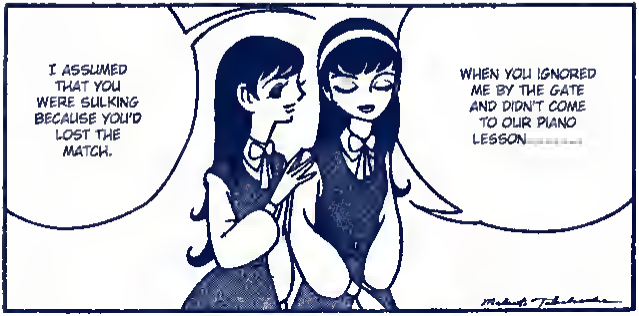

LET THEM TALK— I DON'T CARE WHAT THEY THINK. I DON'T FEEL GUILTY OR EMBARRASSED ABOUT IT.
I GAVE THAT OTHER MATCH MY ALL, TOO, AND SHE BEAT ME FAIR AND SQUARE.....

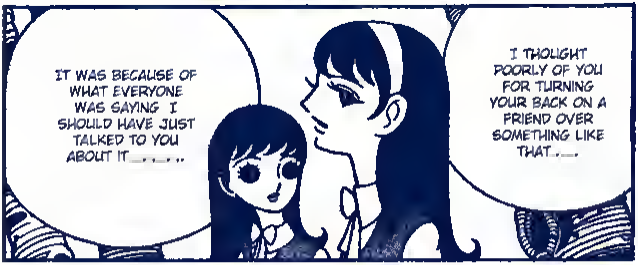
Yukiko tries to smile, but tears come out instead

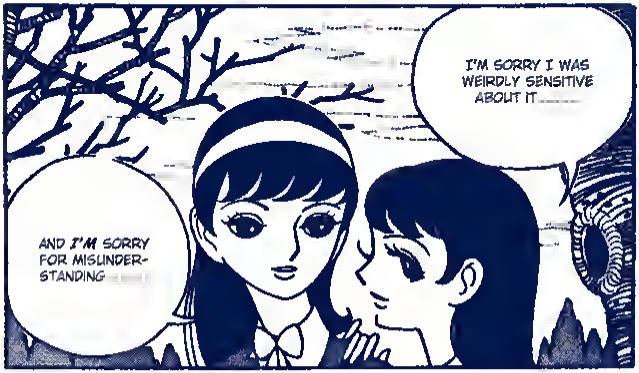


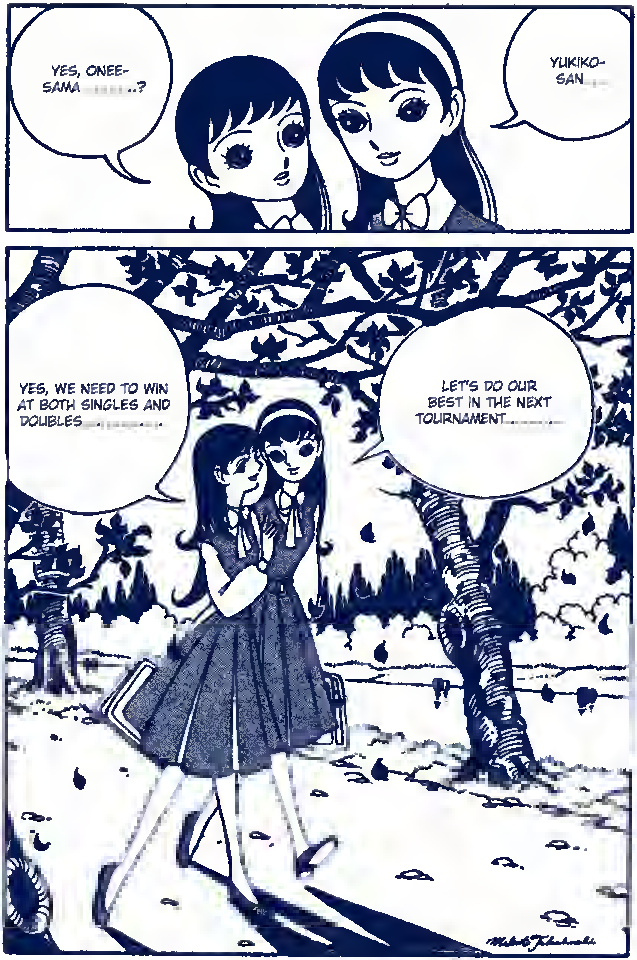
In high spirits, Yukiko tosses her paddle away and rushes to Chikage's side

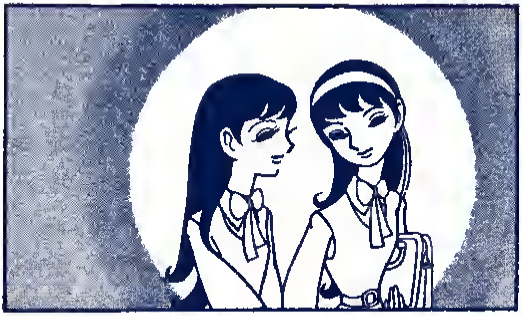
Yukiko and Chikage, arms around one another, bask in the setting sun as they stride beneath the cherry trees


I ASSUMED THAT YOU WERE SULKING BECAUSE YOU'D LOST THE MATCH.
WHEN YOU IGNORED ME BY THE GATE AND DIDN'T COME TO OUR PIANO LESSON.....


IT WAS BECAUSE OF WHAT EVERYONE WAS SAYING I SHOULD HAVE JUST TALKED TO YOU ABOUT IT.....
I THOUGHT POORLY OF YOU FOR TURNING YOUR BACK ON A FRIEND OVER SOMETHING LIKE THAT.....


I'M SORRY I WAS WEIRDLY SENSITIVE ABOUT IT.....
AND *I'M* SORRY FOR MISUNDER-STANDING.....


YES, ONEE-SAMA.....?
YUKIKO-SAN.....
YES, WE NEED TO WIN AT BOTH SINGLES AND DOUBLES.....
LET'S DO OUR BEST IN THE NEXT TOURNAMENT.....



They look fondly at one another, exchanging cheerful smiles for the first time in many days

A warmth that the golden tops of the cherry trees seem to share

Yukiko's resentment for Ayako has dissipated now. Her heart glows with warmth——

The cherry trees rustle in the evening breeze, as though they too are glad of the girls reconciliation ..... "Thank goodness," they seem to murmur. "What a joyous occasion....."
Makoto Takahashi
Fin

Tsuukai Manga Bunko

The Rows of Cherry Trees

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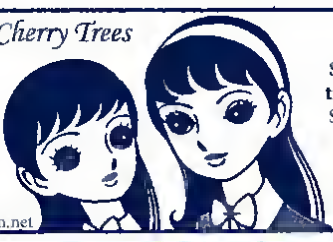

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